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Nº 1



MRS. MITE
BOARDING HOUSE





Front.

OUR HUSSY.

BEHIND
A
BRASS KNOCKER



SOME GRIM REALITIES

IN PICTURE AND PROSE

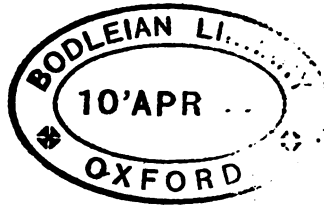
BY
FREDERICK BARNARD AND CHARLES H. ROSS

THE PICTURES ENGRAVED BY DALZIEL BROTHERS

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"Of all the mysteries which enter into the composition of human nature—that concrete of mysteries—the most astonishing is, perhaps, the pleasure we derive from the observation of the horrible. We are shocked into interest, horrified into delight."—THE FREE LANCE.

"Truth needs no disguise; its noblest garb is its own nakedness."—OLD PLAY.

"Je ne me défends pas. Mon œuvre me défendra. C'est une œuvre de vérité."
—PREFACE TO "L'ASSOMMOIR."



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" In attempting an adequate representation of what has been aptly termed

A LITTLE HEAVEN UPON EARTH,

much of the difficulty Mr. ROBINS feared to encounter he is happily relieved from by the extraordinary renown which the late worthy possessor has imparted to this incomparable retreat; but fear and trembling now succeeds in grappling with the Herculean task of portraying the countless beauties that are congregated

Within the Walls of this Elysium."

*—Extract from the Auction Bill of a late
eminent Auctioneer.*

ON THE THRESHOLD.



RAT-TAT-TAT-TAT-TAT!

In the corner of a square. In the corner of a square which, properly speaking, is not a square at all, but an oblong enclosure with one end knocked out, and approachable only on three sides of it by foot-passengers; whilst no living cabmen, unless brought there at snail's pace and the horse led by a skilled inhabitant with gingerly regard to sharp angles and sudden twistings, could, I take my oath, find the way in at the fourth entrance. A square, in its time of the genteelest and most select, but wedged in of late years by irreverent builders, screwed up, squeezed, and jostled. A square of no account for private residences, and inconveniently situated for places of business—a neglected, despised square, in the sere and yellow leaf, sickening—well-nigh moribund; whilst all round it the huge machinery at the newspaper offices groans and clatters the night through, busy at work turning out the stuff that is presently, when day dawns, to set the world in a ferment and hurry-scurry, as the malicious thrust of an idler's stick will the myriads in an ants'-hill.

The corner house. It is to let now, and has been long so. Ribald youths have rung at its jangling bell until they have broken the wire. Stray panes of glass in its dull, dead-eyed windows they have also broken. The brass knocker itself was long ago taken away by its owner, or wrenched off by some thief. The house's inmates are scattered now—north, south, east, west—who knows where, and who cares? A crowd of ghosts gather behind the rusty bolts and bars and chain as I rat-tat-a-tat-tat-tat with my knuckles upon the place the knocker once occupied, and I fancy I hear them whispering timidly upon the other side of the keyhole, hesitating whether or not they shall admit me. But I *will* go in. I HAVE. And now, grim skeletons, quick, quick! On with the flesh and clothes you wore, the long-mouldering, musty, and mildewed clothes——

* * * * *

RAT-

TAT-

TAT-

A-

TAT-

TAT!!

BEHIND A BRASS KNOCKER.

CHAPTER I.

THE GIANTESS.

THE head of the establishment. The lady whom the boarding-house belongs to. Our genial hostess, "the Giantess," the scoffers have dubbed her—"the Giantess of Grindyerbones Castle." A small, thin, wiry, washed-out woman, eager and anxious-faced. She comes forward with a forced smile, which has something that seems to me quite pitiful about it. She is dressed as near to the fashion as she has time to follow it, but her clothes have a tossed and tumbled look, as though they were thrown about carelessly when hurriedly dragged off at night, and sat upon or crushed beneath a heavy weight. She rubs one hand over the other as she speaks to you, and more than once in the few sentences she has to say makes vague reference to the "home comforts" promised in the advertisement you read in your *Bradshaw* before coming to her. "Ghoul Square, sir," she says, as you leave. "No. 1. But allow me to give you one of my cards. Mrs. Mite, sir. Mite by name, and Mite by nature. It's odd it should be so, isn't it? He! he! All the gentlemen laugh——" And she stops abruptly with no smile upon her face, over which a grey shadow passes, and her eyes wander with a frightened look around the room. A moment afterwards, though, her hands are passing again one over the other, and she beams with a dim radiance and proffers you a crumpled curtsey as you take your leave, saying something more about the "home comforts."

Poor soul! There is no one on earth with less knowledge of the comforts of home. She has a house, but is not at home in it. She has a daughter who does not care for her—who is pretty, and idle, and dirty, and who robs her when she can. She has a husband—a man of mystery, who is generally travelling, but who has been known to turn up after a long absence and beat her the first night.

Mrs. Todgers, you may remember, told Miss Pecksniff that no one would believe what she had undergone on account of gravy. "There is no such passion in human nature," said she, "as the passion for gravy among commercial gentlemen." And Mrs. Mite complains that she doesn't know where to turn for "bits of brown." By some fatality her boarders all like their meat over-cooked. There is, as a rule, no lack of gravy, but the joint "goes no way." It is a sight to make you sad to see her when the cover is lifted and the cormorants gathered round glare upon the doomed joint with greedy

THE GIANTESS.

It was upon the stage of a great London theatre, one shivery December morning, that I first made the acquaintance of Miss 'Melia, Mrs. Mite's daughter. She, with a number of other ragged little wretches, had been "taken on" for the pantomime. She was to be a frog.

You see, Mite is an oddish name, and one likely to arrest the attention of those hearing it for the first time, and it sounded odder still in the mouth of little 'Melia, who, when questioned by the prompter, gave it and her address "Off Court, Strand," in a shrill treble, boldly.

"Have you been on before?" the prompter asked.

"No, sir."

"Do you do anything?"

"I help mamma."

"What at?"

"Flower-making."

"She seems a sharp 'un," said the stage manager, patting 'Melia approvingly upon the head. "We'll make a frog of her."

And so she was made a frog of, without more ado.

'Melia was about seven—morally more. Physically she was rather small for her age. She had light brown hair, bound with a piece of faded red velvet. Her ears were pierced, and she wore brass earrings. Round her neck was a glass bead necklace. On one finger of a dirty little hand she wore a bead ring. Her stockings were too big for her; her boots were burst. She had a pretty little round face, like an angel's, a tiny nose, bright, white, regular teeth, pouting red lips, and big, bold blue eyes.

My first impression was that she would grow up a naughty little girl. She has.

Presently—after the celebration of the centenary of the establishment of the School of Dramatic Art—when ladies and gentlemen take quite naturally to playacting as a profession, and it gets to be a mere toss-up whether a young gentleman become a high churchman or a low comedy merchant, or a young lady learn clog hornpipe dancing or set baits to catch a good young curate, things behind the scenes will, no doubt, be made a little more comfortable. Ventilation and cleanliness will possibly be introduced in certain departments, and unnecessary draughts blocked out of others by the aid of glass windows or sacksful of shavings. Just now, though, at some places, things are a trifle rough. They were rough at the theatre where 'Melia played frog.

The place the big ballet ladies dressed in was a sort of cellar. In the daytime the light came to it through an iron grating, which at night was blocked up. About fifty women pigged in it—old enough some, some very young, some gentle born, some dragged up from the streets. The "service" was comprised in one piece—a pail. The ballet changed dresses some three or four times. There was a good deal of confusion.

BEHIND A BRASS KNOCKER.

The manager, stage manager, prompter, and call-boy had to make periodical raids among this bevy of boxed-up beauty, sweltering in an atmosphere which pricked your throat and made you gasp, and hook out some of its component parts like periwinkles. The hole the children called their dressing-room was worse.

Rising young actresses like our frog are not allowed to have their mammas behind the scenes. It would be hardly reasonable to expect it; see what a crowd there would be. And if the mammas, why not the papas, who might muster even numerically stronger?

Mrs. Mite was glad when she heard that her little daughter had "got a show." The wages were better than those 'Melia could earn at artificial flower-making, even when she was steady and worked. The good lady, however, had some sort of misgivings. She had, in truth, been "behind herself" a long while ago, and a wicked lord, in a broad-brimmed hat with a fur collar to his coat, had patted her on the head—paternally.

Thinking of those days gone by, she would sometimes say, "What a fool I was to marry that man"—meaning Mite—not the broad-brimmed peer. "Well—well, we never know. It's once in a life one has a chance, and then if one throws it away——"

Mamma was talking much in this strain when little 'Melia found her. She had been taking home some work, when she met a lady friend, and they had "popped" in somewhere for a little something. "Pop" has a kind of spontaneous flirty kind of sound about it, tending to a certain extent to remove the prejudice which might otherwise be attached to entering and drinking at the bar of a common public house deliberately and aforethought.

It was at the bar 'Melia found mamma and the other lady, who gave 'Melia a sip out of her glass, saying, "There, that won't hurt you."

"Well, what's to be will be," said mamma philosophically, shaking her head. "She's young, though, ain't she? And it's a place that's full of temptations, is behind the scenes of a theatre." (Here her mind strayed to the fur-collared coat with the nobleman inside.) "*How much are you to get?*"

* * * * *

Good gracious me, though! why not let bygones be bygones? Why drag these things into the broad dazzling daylight? 'Melia is no longer on the stage, and Mrs. Mite keeps a highly respectable boarding-house in Ghoul Square, Pressman Street, E.C.

CHAPTER II.

JAWBONE, THE UNAPPEASABLE.

BEYOND the precincts of Ghoul Square, outside Mite's bailiwick, out of hearing of the Brass Knocker, broad sunshine bathes the open street; the joyous voices of vast vanloads of holiday-making children mingle with the braying of the irrepressible cornet, and set the contemplative sparrow, high-dried and smoked, upon the housetop hard by, thinking strange things have come to pass. The faint echoes of this passing music and merriment reaches the pent-up house, and amongst its grim shadows little Mite raises her white weary face and listens. Once on a time for her, too, were there sunshine and music—a far-off time, before the well of truth had quite dried up, the river of life grown slow, shallow, and sluggish; her heart so heavy; hope died; and she quite realized that she was there, alone and unloved, battling desperately—the world against her, presently to be beaten down breathless, trampled underfoot, and left to perish in some other corner, meaner and more squalid, and more out of sight. As a louder burst of music and a ringing cheer from bell-like voices breaks upon the silence of the Square, little Mite's eyes fill with tears, and blot out the cruel details of the butcher's book lying open before her. In the passage the butcher stamps to and fro, having just sent down a message that it's too bad, and he can't go away without some money—danged if he can! Upstairs, lolling out of a garret window, 'Melia Mite is listening to the tune—a music hall tune—first made popular by the warblings of a Lion Comique. She knows the words, and has heard him sing them. I vow you might search a long, long while, and yet not find a prettier picture than our 'Melia makes up there, framed by the dingy woodwork, with her light hair, and bright teeth, and milk-white flesh. Was little washed-out Mite ever as young and pretty? But the butcher keeps on stamping, and mamma, wiping the tears from her eyes, collects herself as well as she can and creeps upstairs to face him and tell lies.

Quite a busy morning has this been with Mrs. Mite's tradespeople. "Here's Mr. Doughy, ma'am. He say can you let him have a little. Mr. Plums have sent round, ma'am. He say he'd rather not let you have no more things if you don't settle up; and Mr. Briskett he have call twice. What to say to 'em all's more 'an I can 'magine." Then Mrs. Mite goes up and tells lies and makes promises. "I've heard all this afore," says one of the much-put-off. "I'm 'most sick of it; so there, I tell you!" Honest, upright, true-born Englishmen, *they* make no overcharges, and never add up wrongly, or put on a few shillings turning over a leaf. Presently when by some desperate effort little Mite pays one off, he allows a big discount,—perhaps treats Mite to "sherry wine" in his back parlour, and trusts she won't take away her custom.

RAT

:



IN ANTICIPATION OF ROAST SUCKING-PIG.

BEHIND A BRASS KNOCKER.

At length the butcher goes his way (I think I hear the jingling of glasses just before he takes his departure), and calm is restored for awhile to the troubled mother's breast. I think I hear more jingling when the door is closed upon Mr. Briskett, and perhaps Mite settles her nerves. At any rate, I am certain I hear the servant say, "Here's luck, ma'am,"—a common toast, I am informed, among the lower classes. And then comes Jawbone's thundering rat-tat-tat; it is time to get another dinner ready!

Did I hear you asking who Jawbone is? For the outward shape of the man I refer you to Mr. Barnard's picture, and I will add such details as I am able to add. He is the Champion Chewer of our menagerie, the Knife-Swallower, the Juggler Fiend, the Cut-and-come-again Man, the Platter-Cleaner, the Man of the Maw, the Gobbling Changeling: after him the deluge and empty dishes. Heavens! how that man can eat, and how he does! Many and many a time has Mite, in the bitterness of her spirit, determined to give him notice—to get rid of him; but Mrs. Mite is a woman full of unfulfilled resolutions, and Jawbone still fattens on the best, and puts it away by the hundredweight. I have been told that the *restaurateurs* who give huge shilling and eighteenpenny dinners frequently fall victims to hungry ostrich-natured wretches who seek them out, and settle down upon them, a dead loss, and that then the *restaurateur* rises up wrathfully and does desperate deeds, even to giving them their money back, and bidding them go forth and return no more; but our Mite has not the pluck and energy thus to act. There will surely come a time, everything having grown scarce, when men will combine against your inordinate big eater, and very properly put him to death. What excuse has this Jawbone to offer for the wicked waste of food the keeping life in him necessitates? 'Tis true that tons of good and wholesome food are annually thrown into the rapacious maws of monstrous beasts at the Zoological Gardens; but then these beasts bring visitors, who pay sixpences and shillings to see them, and of what moment is it whether there is or is not another day's life in Jawbone? No one comes to see him ("Thank Heaven they don't," says Mrs. Mite, "if they've half his appetite"); no one wants to. He is an orphan, I learn, works for his living, and spends his money on himself. He is regular in his payments, and expects to get what he pays for, and he takes good care he does.

The sun rises, and the sun sets, and Jawbone's jaws wag on for ever. There are wars and rumours of wars; shipwrecks, earthquakes, railway accidents, big bankruptcies—universal wretchedness prevails, but Jawbone breakfasts heartily, lunches well, dines heavily, does his share at tea-time, and is the last to rise from the supper-table.

I believe the generality of murderers are hearty eaters. The loin of pork Mr. Hunt bought for supper, and which travelled to Elstree in the gig with Thurtell and Weare, is historical as are the sausages Müller wolfed for a



IN ANTICIPATION OF ROAST SUCKING-PIG.

HER STIFF-STARCHED MAJESTY.

wager, and that other roast pork the Mannings ate over the buried body of their victim ; but the young and innocent may have as big swallows. Why, then, after all, should I be hard on Jawbone? It ought, on the contrary, to be a pleasure to me, as it costs me nothing, to see him feed thus heartily. As he comes for a third help, I glance over at our Mite, and see her eyes rise and fall, and her wasted little hand tremble with the bread-crumbs.

"What's that I heard just now, Mrs. Topperton?" he cries, as he leans back after wiping his mouth. "Is to-morrow sucking-pig day? I hope it's a big 'un."

Something almost like a smile agitates Mite's thin lips. *It is not she who finds the sucking-pig*, but Mrs. Topperton—a time-honoured custom with that lady.

CHAPTER III.

HER STIFF-STARCHED MAJESTY.

A N ill-conceived name, given to her without just reason.

"If I were Queen of England!" says a little girl with a deep-drawn sigh, and with great big eyes fixed upon space, presently to be peopled with imaginary lords and ladies lowly bowing as she sweeps by in much ermine and yards on yards of purple velvet, a crown on her head, and sceptre in her hand. All children think kings and queens sleep in their crowns. Happy dream, if irksome to the wearer! "If I were Queen of England!—Oh!"

But there cannot well be more than one Queen of England at the same time, and some of us have to make our minds up to be something else a little less, and be as contented as is possible in the backest back row. Mrs. Topperton is not Queen of England, but the relict of a highly respectable gentleman, who, when on earth, was something of importance in the county of Hants, and kept horses and hounds. Of the grand doings in those days, now remote, Mrs. Topperton has much to say, and says it with a stately manner and a slow and deliberate utterance, and only the ribald snigger behind her back.

A splendid ruin of a great lady is she, wearing ponderous jewellery, and silks and satins of such substantiality they might surely stand alone without a wearer, and a cap, in which fruit and flowers are blended lavishly, over a front with ringlets that is almost ostentatiously false.

There is, doubtless, to the scoffer, enough and to spare of what is ridiculous in the poor lady's personal appearance, in her fine airs, so out of place in this shabby menagerie behind a brass knocker in Ghou Square,

BEHIND A BRASS KNOCKER.

and it is so easy to laugh ; but if we join in the mirth, let us take care she does not see us—or it were cruel !

Did not the best story-teller you ever knew in all your life sometimes repeat himself? For my part, I have known men whose lives were full of feverish change and bustle, who were for ever out and about seeing strange sights, of which it was their trade to write descriptions for the newspapers, and who yet, when their turn came to tell stories over the supper-table at the club, would still tell the same thing again and again—a thing of long ago, when they were little more than boys—when the sun shone—in the springtime of their lives. What, then, can be expected of a poor old lady whose life is ebbing away pitifully here in a corner, and who lives but in the past? And if we know those well-worn histories of “*my father*,” and “*my husband*,” and “*my house*,” and “*my horses*” almost as well as Mrs. Topperton herself—and, to our thinking, could tell them much more pointedly—shall we too brutally resent the recapitulation of their monotonous details as an outrage on our own valuable time, and cut her short in the middle of the narrative? Well, if we *must*, don't let it be on sucking-pig day—that would be too ungrateful.

Sucking-pig day, it may be as well to inform the ignorant, is an institution of vast importance at No. 1 Ghoul Square. Mrs. Topperton has been a boarder at Mrs. Mite's full half a dozen years, and twice a year has sucking-pig day been celebrated with much pomp and ceremony.

It is from the farm of one of her tenants that the sucking-pig comes, and is generously placed upon the general table by Mrs. Topperton, who on this auspicious occasion carves. The whole business is most impressive. Rumours of roast pig have been about for days, and, as the hour approaches, the establishment is pervaded with an odour which is tantalizing in the extreme.

Mrs. Topperton, in a satin gown as stiff as a board, a cap with half Covent Garden spread about on it and trailing down behind, and another front (she has two, of different shades of brown), more outrageously false than ever, takes her place at table, and herself sharpens the carving-knife.

From round the cruets Mrs. Mite's anxious face may be seen peeping, with the old forced smile upon it. In front of her is a doubtful-looking stew, which she supplies as a second dish, thankful that the sacrifice of a joint is not for this once demanded of her. The guests crowd round the hospitable board, and eye the pig as ogres might a human baby roasted brown. There is a breathless silence as the point of the knife dips into the tender suckling, and its gravy flows.

The ceremony proceeds. The ladies are asked what portion of the pig they prefer, which leads to much simpering, and the exchange of courtesies of perhaps a somewhat cramped and angular character, for even now rage and fury battle with the pangs of hunger, presently to show themselves



THE TOPPERTON.

HER STIFF-STARCHED MAJESTY.

openly when repletion has set in. More than one pair of eyes have ere this been turned towards the doubtful stew as to a goal of refuge. But no; hang it all! the stew is too doubtful. Besides, there is a seductiveness about this young pig, and an aroma that is absolutely demoralizing. Pride falls before pig, and grovels among the bread-crumbs.

There is much bread crumbling about on sucking-pig days, for Mrs. Topperton's carving is a lengthy process, maddening to lookers-on.

Now and again Mrs. Mite's wee voice is heard in half-hearted entreaty that Miss Wolf, Mrs. Goblin, or Mr. McGorger should give the stew a turn, but they wave her off. They "will none on't," not while pig and hope are left.

At length—for everything must have an ending, a curly one this time, exceeding crisp—the pig is all helped out. Then, in reply to Mrs. Topperton's ceremonious inquiry whether all have had what they liked, there is a faint murmur of assent, broken into by Mr. Gobbler passing round his plate in quest of the doubtful stew. Then follow pudding and pie, cheese and grace, and now the ladies seek the drawing-room. "How the place does reek of that awful pig!" exclaims a shrill voice on the stairs. Mrs. Topperton hears it. "Awful or not," she says to some one near her, "the woman had two big helps—enough for any ploughboy."

Treason is in the air, mingling with the abhorred perfume of pig, and I appeal to you, could aught earthly be more abhorrent than this *fade* flavour when one is full of swineflesh unto choking?

"After all," it is said round about, openly and loud-voiced, "is one to be placed under a debt of eternal gratitude on account of a slice of that beastly pig thing? I am sure I, for one, am heartily sorry I ever touched it. It always did disagree with me."

The murmurs swell. She cannot help hearing them. In the middle of it all Mrs. Mite, most inopportunist, comes running up, takes her hand, and whispers, "It was a great success! Delicious!"

The old lady lets her hand drop, and watches the unhappy Mite as it wriggles away and is lost in the crowd, with dull fixed eyes that ache with heat.

"What a fuss about a stupid sucking-pig!" I fancy I hear the reader exclaim. Mark me, it is of such trifles, if that pig or this old lady's deep and bitter mortification be so dubbed, that the misery and martyrdom of most of our lives is made up.

Presently she has, with a disdainful gesture, stalked—flung herself, I might almost say—from the room, and a while after cries herself wearily to sleep. Let us, you and I, whilst the sun yet shines, laugh with and at the world. To overlive your time and fret out your last weary days, jostled by an unsympathetic throng, unheeded, unloved, must be horrible! I shudder as I think of it, and hug to my breast, in feverish tremor, the one last thing on earth left to me to love and care for, or to love and care for me. Care for me!—mourn for me! *Will it?*

CHAPTER IV.

THE SUPERNUMERARIES.

"**I**S life worth living?" In the case of many thousands of women I hardly think it is. In the lives of most men there is some bustle and excitement, some reason for going abroad, some aim, and end, and object; but the majority of women are doomed to a dull humdrum monotonous respectability that must be little short of maddening.

I have during my time had the honour of being acquainted with several young married men. I have known them before they got married. Nay, they have actually, some of them, come and consulted me on the subject. They have dashed at me and abruptly imparted the intelligence. They have said, "Look here, old fellow, I've something to tell you—I—I am going to be married!" Then they have fallen back a pace and fixed me with an eye. What, in the name of Heaven! I have often asked myself, did they expect me to do or say under the circumstances? Should I have clutched these reckless fledglings by the hand, and congratulated them upon their folly? I don't know, but I think I have always done the wrong thing. *I have asked them, "WHY?"* This seemed to come upon them as a sort of surprise; it appeared not to have occurred to them before. People did get married, of course. They had read as much in books; it always happened to the heroes and heroines in the third volume. They themselves had for ever so long been flying about in space, sleepless, agonized—a prey to doubts and fears innumerable. Did she really, truly love him? Would she ever be his? Would pa give his consent? No melodrama, no poem, no romance ever equalled in thrillingness the events of the few past weeks, and now, when on the very threshold of Rapture and Bliss, to be asked "Why?"

I cannot tell, young lady readers, whether you will love or hate me most when I say that my query had not the slightest deterrent effect—that the young men went straight away and got married, on the top of it, as fast as possible.

Got married! I have been to see some very young men at their new homes (how those homes did smell of damp mortar!) in rising suburbs. I have assisted at the house-warming (it never got very warm), and, when they have been quite straight, dropped in "in a homely way, no nonsense, you know, old fellow," and fed with the delirious couple. "I am as happy," one male thing once told me, "as the day is long!" This communication was made on the top of a vehicle known as the "Express 'bus," which started at a terribly early hour on a foggy morning from that ghastly suburb. She had got up and made tea with somewhat spasmodic cheerfulness, and seen him (who was Everything on earth, and in the future) and me (who



SCANDAL.

MAMSELLE.

didn't matter) off to the City. She had lit a match for his cigar, and kissed her hand to him, or generally, as it seemed, to all the outside passengers, and there was an evident inward sense of proprietorship about that young man gratifying to see, and a trustfulness about the poor dear unhappy young woman I have thought over, often, since.

Ah, me! but when the little dream is dreamt, when the money grows scarce, or the coating of sugar wears a trifle more thin! When he doesn't come home quite so early or regularly! When she sits in the twilight listening to the muffin-bell tinkling afar off up the dreary street! When the dinner spoils, or the tea gets over-brewed! When at last coming home (perchance he dropped in at the Frivolity bar by the way), he grumbles at everything, swears, pulls his slippers on, his shabby coat (good enough for her now), and reads the paper till he falls asleep. If a woman has not servants to bully, what pleasure on earth is left to her? I can't think.

Poor disappointed and neglected spinsters are numbered among our supernumeraries, and widows who have had happy releases. All of them are rather poor, none of them take too cheerful a view of life, and have very few kind things to say of those around them. Is life worth living for such as these, worn and wasted, weary-eyed? Don't you, if you yourself are young and happy, fresh-coloured, plump, full of life and hope, feel an unquenchable hatred and scorn for these scandalmongers slyly whispering, chuckling, spitefully? I know you do, but are you right? and should you not make allowances, and have pity?

Oh, youth and happiness—all gone! Oh, flowers faded, scent-lingering no longer; love-vows illegible, love-tokens soiled and tawdry and out of fashion—a jumble of insignificant odds and ends of no money value, that have been prized so long, with memories of fond words spoken by lips that no longer cling on the skull they clung to. Just such as these, a pack of rubbish, Mrs. Mite turned out only yesterday from the box of a spinster boarder who had died in her debt. We both laughed over the foolish trifles—naturally.

CHAPTER V.

MAMSELLE.

"I DO so like to hear the wind as I lie in my bed, ana then turn round and tuck myself up nice and warm and noogy."

It is our French lady who speaks. We call her, taking our cue from little Mite, "Mamselle." She is now rather an elderly mamselle, but fairly well preserved, as indeed she ought to be, seeing what care she takes of herself. Mamselle eats a good deal, and does her share of drinking; but she is cautious withal, and follows up any little excesses with the corrective

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pill. It is as well, at dinner-time, to take Mamselle as your guide, and choose what she chooses in the matter of dishes. She, you may be sure, has gathered together full particulars relating to the hashes and stews and the stock the soup is made of. There is not a pie comes up that she has not had a finger in, and its lid hides no secrets from her.

She is one of the most amiable ladies I ever met, and has a pleasant smile and a pretty something to say to one and all, and she doesn't mean a word she says. Watch her now softly crossing the floor, no doubt fearful of waking old Mrs. Topperton, whose heavy breathing might, by the ill-disposed, almost be likened to a snore. See, she is carrying a pillow, doubtless it is to prop up Topperton's head, now resting against the hard wooden edge of the chair at a painful angle. Not a bit of it. The pillow properly belongs to the chair poor Topperton sits in; but Mamselle hid it artfully away just before dinner behind the window-curtain, and now is bearing it and another in triumph to her own arm-chair, which is placed in a nice warm corner far away from the nearest draught. Some of the other ladies who have not easy chairs or soft pillows, and who are placed here and there not too comfortably, glower at her in silent spite. But this does not disturb her. She leans back placidly and opens her yellow-covered book. The philosopher whose work she is studying is not the most amiably disposed; his views of life scarcely, on the whole, can be considered cheerful; but she reads her Zola with a certain grim satisfaction, and possibly derives the same amount of satisfaction from the sufferings of Gervaise as in listening to a storm whilst she lies warm in bed. Does she, I wonder, when the wind rattles the casement, shrieks through the keyhole, and rumbles in the chimney, picture to herself shivering wretches huddled up in doorways, under dry arches, in the safest and most solitary holes and corners, away from the policeman's beat and beyond the reach of his bull's-eye? Does she picture to herself their want and misery and utter helplessness, and then turn round and tuck herself up nice and warm and noogy?

"Did you see that poor miserable old woman, jabbering with cold, at the corner as you came in, Mamselle?" I venture to ask her one afternoon.

"Oh, yes!" she says; "dreadful, wasn't it? If it hadn't been such a bother opening my portemonnaie, I'd have given her a halfpenny."

To-day is Mrs. Topperton's roast sucking-pig day, and we have all been regally regaled—Mamselle with two large helps.

"Well," I say to my French friend upstairs, "another whole year before we have any more pig!"

"What a blessing!" says she, first glancing at Topperton to make sure she sleeps. "*But I shall not suffer much, I have taken a pill.*"



MAMSELLE.

CHAPTER VI.

THE UNFATHOMABLE FRITZ.

WE are all agreed about Fritz. Look at him! Do, please, look at him! Oblige me by looking at Fritz! What is he thinking about, do you think? Don't waste time considering the question. I will tell you. He is thinking of nothing at all. His mind is a blank. He is hardly a machine—at any rate, not a machine in proper working order.

"That fellow must put away a heap of victuals," a boarder pleasantly observes to our poor long-suffering Mite.

"N—no, not so much as—as——" and she stammers and smiles, that pinched-up painful smile we know so well.

"As some people, you were going to say," says her interrogator (it is McGorger).

"No—no—as you might think," says the wily little woman. "And nothing comes amiss to him."

The platters, as a rule, are clean enough when they go down from the boarders' table, and, heavens! how close to the bone the joints are hacked! A very vulture must be this Fritz, and used to foraging on battle-fields to get a meal from what is left. What is he fed on? Does he munch bones like a dog?

We are, as I began by saying, all agreed about Fritz on one point, at least: he is an ass. His looks half prove it; his acts confirm the proofs. We have made up our minds that the guileless noodle, knowing nought of the ways of the wicked city in which he has sought refuge, has drifted into the web of a designing woman, been bought up body and soul for twopence-halfpenny sterling, and is fed on paunch pudding and sawdust fire-balls. A stupid, blundering, bullet-headed wretch. What possessed him to take up with the art of waiting? A century of apprenticeship could make nothing out of such rough material. He is all thumbs and big toes. He is a dunce and a dolt, who knocks plates against your head and pours soup down the nape of your neck. There is not one among the boarders he has not bumped or bruised, kicked the shins of, or trodden underfoot; and our rage against him is fast reaching boiling-over point.

Why should a thing like this be kept to our annoyance? Does not that woman Mite make enough out of us to pay for decent attendance?

"I *will* take a few slices since you're so pressing, Mr. Wolf; and here's Mr. Hogg's plate empty too. Shall I pass it up for you, sir?"

There is one thing, though, we must in fairness allow: Fritz is not impertinent. You may call him a fool—an adjectived fool, indeed—and he bears with you meekly. He may be of a contrary opinion—most people are in such cases—but he does not argue the point. He lets you have the

BEHIND A BRASS KNOCKER.

last word, looks penitent, and shuffles away, a foolish, flat-footed creature, unworthy of your anger. He would be a coward indeed who raised his hand against so harmless a nonentity and so stupid a fool.

It is a pleasant practice of Griggs's, our funny gentleman, to surround Fritz with a veil of mystery. Sometimes he finds out that Fritz is a child of noble parentage. Anon he has a secret sorrow gnawing at his heart; or he is deeply and hopelessly in love with a lady of high degree, or with our "Stiff-Starched Majesty," or with little Mite.

"Look at Fritz; he's a goner this journey!" the unsurpassable Griggs scribbles in pencil on a scrap of paper, and passes it down the table. Then all eyes seek Fritz, who, it must be confessed, presents an aspect of imbecility rarely met with beyond the box-lid of a penny Noah's Ark.

"Here, Fritz," says the facetious Griggs, "come out of your home in Vaterland for half a minute, and hand round the melted butter."

We all roar at this exquisite drollery, and Fritz blushes and stumbles, doing damage to the sauce-boat.

What fools, what shallow fools *we* are, all of us, and how ready to sum up and total off the rest of the world! We know, none of us, any more of Fritz than we know of Central Africa—not so much. One bright summer's morning a little silvery-haired gentleman, neatly dressed, steps from the patch of sunshine that illuminates the threshold of No. 1, and bathes the doorstep in its effulgence, and salutes Fritz, who opens the door, by a strange name none of us have ever heard.

Within less than ten minutes Fritz has packed up his worldly belongings—they are few in number—has said he will call for his wages in a day or two, and has left us for ever. Within a week Europe echoes with the story of a great crime—a political assassination—an autocrat's death. The lots had been cast, and to our Fritz had fallen the dread office which, if his aim were sure enough, might mean death to a tyrant—which of a certainty must mean death to him. Within a fortnight he has been tried in a fashion, condemned as a matter of course, and a drunken bungler chokes the life out of him with a rope that breaks a time or two, whilst the mob round his scaffold crack jokes, and the conspirators who urged him to his doom creep away with white scared faces.

Poor devil!

CHAPTER VII.

CHUMP, THE PERFECT GENTLEMAN.

"THERE is a time a day when one dines," says Mr. Chump, folding his fat hands across a waistcoat which is worn and grease-spotted. "People may be born and die at all sorts of odd, unexpected, and uncom-



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fortable hours—and that is generally the case ; but, surely to goodness, if the world is to go on reasonably, one's dinner-hour should be a fixture punctually acted up to."

Mr. Chump is Mrs. Mite's oldest boarder—that is to say, he has been longest with her. He pays more than any one else, having extras for the extra price. He is wealthy and greedy, and, as a carver, without principle, and selfish in the last degree, secreting titbits, and resolutely resisting their disgorgement, even prevaricating with respect to the number of wings attached to a pair of ordinarily constructed fowls, and telling downright lies when hedged in a corner. A shameless man !

Happily, however, he does not frequently carve, firstly, because he often dines out, and secondly, because he is subject to gout in the hands. When not carving, he harasses the next oldest boarder, to whom the office descends, and "Tut-tuts" impatiently should he commit a blunder, or be over-long about the work. At other times Mr. Chump does not come prominently into notice. Dinner over, he will sometimes betake himself drawing-roomwards, and, selecting the softest chair, doze in it for an hour or two. But this is exceptional, he usually preferring his own room, where he is privileged to smoke. No one else may do so in his bed-room, but the exception is made in Mr. Chump's favour upon account of his apartment being situated on the ground floor on a level with the dining-room, which is permitted after dinner to be used as a smoking-room by the rest of the gentlemen.

In the privacy of his chamber Mr. Chump is said to revel in choice liqueurs, and through the keyhole is wafted the fragrant odour of the coffee that he makes for himself. There are also legends extant as to savoury *patés*, assorted sausages of foreign manufacture, and pots of jam in a corner cupboard—snacks he snatches between the regulation meals ; for he has no business or occupation to take him abroad, and when the weather is bad, or his gout troublesome, he will remain indoors all day.

"But there, lor bless you ! he's in nobody's way, and makes no difference at all," says Mrs. Mite, with whom he is a great favourite. "If there were more like him," she has been heard to say, "it would not be so hard to make both ends meet."

Her admiration for Mr. Chump is not, however, wholly shared by the other boarders, for, to tell the truth, we are a selfish crew, ever struggling each for himself, like desperate wretches on a wreck. Yet he gives no cause for offence. Supposed to be fairly well educated, and certainly well-informed upon almost all subjects, he but rarely takes a prominent part in the general conversation, as a rule expressing an opinion only when called upon to do so. Then he empties his mouth, bows courteously, speaks briefly, and goes back to his gobbling. Some of the ladies do not hesitate to call him behind his back "pig" and "porpoise." Mrs. Mite speaks of him as a perfect gentleman, and Miss Mite, whose blue eyes and yellow

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hair seem to find favour with him, and whom he occasionally, when he meets her in the passage, chucks under the chin, makes ugly faces at him openly.

It is rather the exception than the rule for Mrs. Mite's gentlemen boarders to appear in evening dress at dinner. Nor does the Perfect Gentleman often make this sacrifice to the usages of good society ; but on the nights he dines abroad he invariably changes his ordinary frock-coat for a swallowtail, and wears a white tie. As to the manner in which he spends his evenings out, nothing positive is known—all is but conjecture. Some say he belongs to a club, where they play heavily until the small hours in the morning. Others assert that he has tremendously long dinners all by himself at high-priced restaurants. Once he was seen in the stalls at the theatre—another boarder saw him there from the pit—and once a friend of one of the youngest boarders, a gay dog, who came to dine and declared he recognized him, had met him behind the scenes at the opera, where he was well known by the nickname of "the man with the sugar-plums." And, in truth, it is Mr. Chump's habit—an inoffensive and rather pleasant one—of carrying about with him a box of sweetmeats, which he will benevolently bestow on smiling innocence.

But wheresoe'er he goes, and how he spends his time, all that is known is that he stays out very late ; and not infrequently a light sleeper may hear him rolling heavily about with much clatter and many bumps, as though he were not quite absolutely sober. Indeed, it has been whispered that it is the duty of the Nondescript—a boy of doubtful age, who battles with the gentlemen's boots, runs errands, and does odd jobs innumerable, and with whom Miss Mite occasionally has violent altercations in the lower regions—to see him safe into bed, undress him, if necessary, and take away the bed-room candle.

One morning, when his cup of tea is taken to him, he does not answer as usual, though his eyes are open, and the boy thinks there is something odd about the look of him.

Presently there is a wild outcry, and the faces of the other boarders are blanched, and their hands tremble. A little scared crowd blocks up the door of the Perfect Gentleman's room, and gazes curiously round it for the first time. There is an odd litter. A liqueur-bottle unopened, a brandy-bottle half emptied, several boxes of cigars untouched, several *flacons* of scent, a rouge-pot, a powder-puff, a quantity of *bonbons*, four or five sovereigns lying loosely about, and some silver. The clothes he wore are carelessly tossed here and there, and later on, when his pockets are searched, in the pocket of the trousers are found a thousand-pound note, a bad six-pence, and a begging letter from his sister, telling him that she is starving.

On the bed, on his back, the Perfect Gentleman lies dead, and his secrets, if he had any, are buried in his heart.



THE PERFECT GENTLEMAN.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE NONDESCRIPT.

“GOT through my work? Well, no; I ain’t. I niver gets through a ’alf on it. I’m weeks ahind in it, same as I am alonger my sleep. I’ve niver quite got over the ’ears o’ dossed alonging to the month afore lastis.”

Thus our Nondescript, a lad of unlimited promise and small performance. An uncertain character, about whom no one—not even Mrs. Mite—possesses any reliable data. ’Tis true, he must have been born some time somewhere; but where, and how, and of whom? And, above all, Why? What were the stars about when our poor Nondescript fell, head-foremost, into this hard-hearted world? Wasn’t there poverty enough? And misery and crime? Why *was* our Nondescript born? and, being born, how came it he lived? Our Nondescript’s lot in life has not been cast in pleasant places. The back kitchen at Mrs. Mite’s is not a bed of roses, nor the scullery an earthly Paradise. Thence issue at all seasons the shrill denunciation and clamorous rejoinder, drowning the clatter of plates and clang of ironmongery; and ever does a certain nauseous odour of by-gone meals cling to these dim regions, where Mrs. Mite battles with the hirelings and screams her wrongs to the world. There are times, if I am rightly informed, when the beetles get ahead of all preventatives, and fairly take possession of the floor; and I well remember a blood-curdling story, told by a late-hour-keeping boarder, who *heard them in the pitchy darkness down below rustling like dead leaves stirred by the wind.*

How many beetles our Nondescript goes to bed with of a night, or how many join him afterwards, I know not, or whether, after a while, one gets to mind them less upon better acquaintance.

“You’re a-filling out, you are,” says our funny boarder to the Nondescript. “Blessed if I don’t think it’s the beetles. They’re meat and drink, I’m told, to growing boys!”

“Can’t say I’ve quite got up to the flavour on ’em yet awhile, guv’nor,” he replies. “An’ as to growin’ biis, I hearn tell o’ a bi as was ate up by ’em.”

“How was that?” asks our funny boarder.

“Can’t say, guv’nor,” responds the Nondescript; “’less it was they putt him to bed buttered. They’re beggers arter butter, beedles is.”

It isn’t, on the whole, a very wise thing to chaff the Nondescript, and probably of all the household there is but one in which he finds his master, and that is our Hussy. Our ’Melia (the Hussy) is Miranda, and the Nondescript Caliban. There is no Prospero, and the young Prince has not been shipwrecked here as yet. Our Hussy reaches, I take it, as near our Nondescript’s ideal as girl can reach. She has an ear for music; so has

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he, and both can whistle well. Occasionally they have been known to practise duets together down there among the dirty dishes. At other times she has been intensely on her dignity, and has even slapped his face, a punishment for forwardness that he has submitted to contritely. Our Hussy is at all times graceful, and he glib. He is as plain a lad as gaslight ever flickered on, and is always deplorably dirty. Hers is that *beauté du diable*—priceless and all-powerful as it has been since those early days the young Egyptian gentlemen went about without coat-tails, and the girls were not so particular. The beauty of youth, wherein the sky-tipped nose and broad mouth count far before the classic loveliness of maturer age—the beauty of youth and health and high spirits. If I know aught of human nature, the studying of which I began upon some time ago, our Nondescript loves our Hussy, and she—most likely—despises him.

I fancy at times, amidst the squalor of his hard life, a sort of rage takes possession of our Nondescript, and maybe he whets a knife a trifle viciously as he thinks. I suppose that well-to-do people, those I see in carriages languidly lolling among soft cushions, trouble their heads but little over the great social problem, "When will the slaves tire of their slavery, and rise?" The number of our fellow-creatures who are but too happy to run our errands when paid to do so, say "Yes, sir," and "Yes, madam," respectfully, answer bells and lick boots, is enormous; but I can't believe it will be always so. Is that thunder in the air, or but the sound of coming carriage-wheels? The sky is red as blood, and hollow-cheeked men gaze up into it with vengeful eyes. Meanwhile our Nondescript whets his knife. "You're taking the edge off it," says Mrs. Mite. "The wear and the tear there is in this place the Bank of England could not stand against." A strong odour of burnt roast mutton pervades the premises, mingled with a suspicion of "greens water" poured down the sink. Somewhere in the far distance our Hussy is heard whistling that she dreamt she dwelt in marble halls. The Nondescript having given the knife a savage hack upon the pump-handle which takes away a lump of its edge, pours forth melodiously his desire to be a bird. A sound of broken crockery comes from Miss 'Melia's direction. *It is one of those moments in which she feels disinclined to put up with the impertinence of inferiors.*

CHAPTER IX.

THE NONDESCRIPT'S STRAY.

"GER out!"
"And if," says little Mite, white and trembling, a broom-handle in her grasp, "I catch that beastly mongrel in this kitchen once again I'll break every bone in his skin. I WILL! See if I don't!"



THE BEETLES' MATE.

THE NONDESCRIPT'S STRAY.

She never does catch him, so his bones, so far, are unbroken. She meets with him casually a good many times, but she never succeeds in laying hold of him—except one evening at twilight, the kitchen having at the time no other occupants, and she sitting before the empty grate sobbing softly to herself; and then he comes and lays his dear old head upon her knee and looks up into her worn face with tender eyes. She does not break them then. Instead, she strokes him softly, and for awhile the pipe of peace is smoked, so to speak, and the hatchet buried.

Properly speaking, I maintain this dog is nobody's dog; but he has got to be generally spoken of as the Nondescript's Stray. Our Nondescript was, in fact, the first person who smuggled him on to the premises, and there he has since abided, in spite of extradition treaties, writs of *habeas corpus*, readings of the Riot Act, and unlimited broomstick.

Our funny boarder Griggs has christened him Slinker, which is also, I am given to understand, a slang term for a penny polony; and, in truth, the dog slinks, slides, slopes, and slithers in a way that is wonderful to behold; if, by the way, you happen to be in a position to keep your eye on him, but this is not too easily managed. He is here. He is there! You have him. You've lost him! He has doubled and rounded. Ah!—now! No! HE IS GONE!

Our literary lady, likening him to the canine hero of one of Captain Marryat's delightful works, has dubbed him *Snarleyow, the Dog Fiend*, but this, to my thinking, seems a libellous description of the poor cur. There is nought fiendish in his nature. He is but a superfluity. Which of us, well fed, warmly housed, and richly clad, which of us shall say that she or he is not like this ownerless cur, though we, maybe, have owners in plenty? which of us is not a superfluity, and might not also be quite easily done without?

Is there no eager throng without to fill our places when we shall leave them vacant? I fancy I hear the shuffling of impatient feet, and the strumming of greedy fingers upon the panels of the door of this dim room, where I lie sick and shudder at the sound. When the bells on my poor cap have left off jingling, and lie rusted and dustcoated, will the world be less merry? I think not. When the echo of my footsteps has gone for ever, will *she* wait for some other as she waited for me, and for you, my brother? And he, my sister, who waits now for you? I am afraid she and he will. Here's little Bessie, my pet dog, with silken coat and coaxing ways, and eyes that are seemingly full of love and faith, and who, I feel sure—There goes a rat-tat-tat at the door—a friend, no doubt, whose knock she is familiar with, for she has rushed out to welcome him with clamorous delight. *It is the tax-collector.*

But I am wandering away from the old boarding-house days and the Nondescript's Stray, and must return. That little hussy Miss 'Melia, it

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would appear, is a patron of the drama from cheap points of view, and she and a young lady friend not infrequently find their way to the gallery of one or other of the London theatres, from which altitude they look down enviously upon long-stockinged loveliness, and the Nondescript's Stray joins the party.

They don't smuggle him in, you know, and he doesn't pay, of course; but, in spite of check and money-takers and policemen at the door, in he comes, and presently there arises a turmoil. "Whose dog is this 'ere? Ger out!"

Then he is unceremoniously chucked forth, this free list patron of the drama, and homeward he wends his way, or sometimes he slinks in again, finds Miss Mite, nestles close to her, and is happy.

More than once he has, as you can easily imagine, been lost, sometimes for a day or two, and after these brief absences returns a dejected mud-bespattered creature, generally with a bit of broken string round his neck, and once a ragged little girl brought him home, hugging him anyhow up, with his limbs in the air like the legs of a table.

"What's this?" says a new boarder, encountering her upon the doorstep.

"The young gentleman's dog, sir."

"What young gentleman?"

"The young gentleman in the kitching, sir, as fetches the yarrans."

Poor Slinker! poor waif and stray! the world is against him, and every hand and foot raised to deal a blow; and he knows it, and is ever on the watch. So have I seen a homeless ragged child in the streets, when stretching forth my hand to it, it has shrunk back, raising its arms in an attitude of defence, with rage and terror on its face.

Have you ever been to the Dogs' Home? Upon my soul! I know no drearier sight than that afforded by the piteous look upon those doomed captives' faces. Oh, Bessie, Bessie! you are well off where you are. Don't stray away without mature reflection.

CHAPTER X.

OUR HUSSY.

"LET the words of a virgin," says the good Quarles, "though in a good cause and to a good purpose, be neither violent, many, nor first, nor last; it is less shame for a virgin to be lost in a blushing silence than to be found in bold eloquence." "A maiden," says Shakespeare, "hath no tongue but thought." "Why, there are maidens," says George Eliot, "of heroic touch, and yet they seem like things of gossamer you'd pinch the life out of as out of moths. Oh, 't is not loud tones and mouthiness; 't is not the arms akimbo and large strides that make a woman's force." They



BRINGING HIM HOME.

OUR HUSSY.

all know all about it, these illustrious authors, I have no doubt ; but they had none of them known our Hussy. Known her, did I say ? Who knows her ? No one. And to her mother, poor little long-suffering Mite, she is the most inexplicable of riddles.

The other day died the only man who rightly read the Road Mystery ; and here, in front of me, lies an extract from a private letter written from Dinan. "I do not think," says the writer, "that the London papers have mentioned in what part of France Constance Kent remained for some years. It was here. She went first to the Convent of the Sagesse, then left it for Mlle. De la Tour's, where most of the English young ladies resort. I never saw her, but every one I know did, and all describe her as a flat-faced, reddish-haired, ugly girl, neither stupid nor clever, lively nor morose, and only remarkable for one particular trait, viz., *her extreme tenderness and kindness to very young children*. In the whole school in which she was a pupil, she was the one who would probably be the least remarked, if all were seen together." Our Hussy is not fond of children. Left alone with a baby, she would, in all probability, slap or pinch it—at best pull awful faces at it, and make it cry ; but she has not killed one yet that I know of, which, you must allow, is a point in her favour. What crimes has she committed ? Let us go into details. She lies in bed late, and she takes no part in the household duties, save in a wayward and fitful fashion ; but one of our lady boarders bears testimony to Miss 'Melia's sitting up in bed (the kitchen was her sleeping-apartment, the house being overcrowded at the time) to butter the toast for our breakfast. Occasionally, too, she will help the servant to dust the boarders' bed-rooms ; when, I have reason to believe, she peruses all scraps of handwriting with praiseworthy impartiality, and inspects the contents of pockets the owners have carelessly left unemptied. One day, one of our boarders having promised to procure another boarder tickets for a theatre, and the letter arriving with the name of the theatre printed on the envelope, the other says to Miss 'Melia, "I wonder what there is inside ?" "If you get a jug of boiling water," says she, "and hold the part where it's gummed over the steam, you can easily open and fasten it again, and no one will be any the wiser."

Miss 'Melia has cultivated idleness till she has made high art of it. She is supremely lazy. She always lounges, and lolls, and flops, and sprawls, but always gracefully. I have never known her to assume a perfectly upright posture even at meal-times, and I have watched her twist and twine herself into a score of attitudes whilst lounging in an arm-chair endeavouring to fish up a slipper that had fallen from her foot, rather than rise and stoop for it in the ordinary way. Meanwhile, mamma, with her sleeves turned up and a face as black as a tinker's, is struggling desperately with the hopeless dirt and squalor of the back kitchen, whence comes the sound of high-pitched voices in one long ceaseless wrangle.

BEHIND A BRASS KNOCKER.

Now and again some of our young ladies in approaching Miss 'Melia with that maternal solicitude which in the adorable sex is at times hard to distinguish from impertinent interference with what does not concern them, ask 'Melia why she does not assist her mamma. "See how very hard she works," they say. But 'Melia shrugs her pretty shoulders. "She likes it," 'Melia says. "She wouldn't be happy without."

When the Brass Knocker is not too full, 'Melia's sleeping-apartment is at the top of the house, yet its aspect is hardly picturesque. A bed only made when it is time to lie down in it, and at other times a confused mass of dirty rags huddled higgledy-piggledy, a scratched looking-glass, a broken washhand-basin, and a jug sometimes used to fetch beer in, some odd numbers of penny illustrated miscellanies and penny song-books, some of the pictures from both pinned upon the wall, scattered hair-pins, a pair of boots, one on either side of the room, some clothes on a peg, among them a skirt to which dry mud clings, the wreck of a comb, and a brush three parts bald, a twopenny packet of tinted violet powder, and a dilapidated hymn-book with a paper of rouge in it.

One day Ma, visiting this Boudoir of Beauty, finds hidden beneath the paper lining of a drawer a pair of gilt earrings she has never before seen, a sixpenny finger-ring, a real gold sovereign, and a letter in a strange man's handwriting.

On Sunday evenings 'Melia goes alone to what she calls church.

Loud lamentations arise, and Mrs. Mite wrings her hands and weeps. "What does it mean?—where did you get these?" 'Melia's white face wears an expression of sullen contempt, but she is silent. Ma continues, "Oh, you wicked, bad girl! How do you suppose it will all end?" 'Melia laughs. The lamentations continue, nay, wax even louder, at length to subside into faint tearless whimpers. That night some importunate creditor comes raging for the settlement of his long-standing bill, and will not leave without something on account. The mother is at her wits' end. There is not a farthing in the house—except that sovereign.

She borrows it.

CHAPTER XI.

OBI.

IT was our funny gentleman, of course, who thus nicknamed him, although he has all his fingers—good big ones too; but he has an awful trick of pulling and wrenching at these fingers of his, and cracking all the joints one after another, with reports almost equal to those emitted by the cheap new furniture sanguine young married couples set up housekeeping with, the



OBI.

first evening after the honeymoon when the fire is lighted. It is a thing to listen to and shudder at, and one wonders whilst doing so whether the thumbscrew and rack would be likely to fetch Obi, with his peculiarly pliable construction, much more than ordinary victims, were they applied in the good old style, as described in Mr. Harrison Ainsworth's "Tower of London."

He is a butt of our happy family, and we all have our little jokes at his expense, jokes which it must be confessed are not always too good-natured. He bears with them, however, very good-humouredly or stolidly, perhaps not seeing their point.

He is about twenty-two years of age, and is supposed to have money. He follows no business, but spends his days in some unaccountable gad-fly fashion, roving around the great metropolis and visiting those remarkable places which guide-book writers classify under the head of "sights." Thus the thing they call the Monument has been scaled by him more than once, and the giddy height of the golden cross of St. Paul's is familiar to him. He has been to the British Museum (somewhere near Russell Square), and to the National Gallery (on the north of Trafalgar Square), and the United Service and Geological Museums (goodness only knows where); London's Stone (wherever that may be) he has gazed upon, and he knows the name of the statue in the square of Somerset House (somewhere in the Strand or Fleet Street), and the legend of the watch-face stuck in the wall. One day he takes a railway journey to Wapping to see what the Thames Tunnel is like, and the next traverses a dreadful Subway from Tower Hill. He has been to Jack Sheppard's Roundhouse down a by-way out of Drury Lane, to the old Roman Bath in a court out of the Strand, and to Nell Gwynne's Bath in Bath Street, Newgate Street. He is, indeed, for ever wandering about thus employed. Why? Goodness only knows. Probably to amuse himself. He is an independent gentleman, it seems, and spends his money freely upon himself, though his tastes are not extravagant. One day he says suddenly to our funny man, "You're a lawyer, ain't you?"

"Yes, something of the sort, I think," says Griggs.

"I'll bring you a client," says he.

"I'm much obliged to you."

"I'll bring him at noon to-morrow, if convenient, and he will ask your advice; and you must ask for the money down before you give it to him. What's the price of advice—six and eight?"

"Well, it depends. If there's much of it, let's say thirteen and four."

"Very well, you say thirteen and four, and make him pay it."

Next day, sure enough, Obi brings the client. He is a shabby-looking man in outward appearance, but proves to be a rich jeweller, who, when Obi was at Oxford, had supplied him with bracelets and necklaces.

"This gentleman," said he, "owes me two hundred pounds. He had

BEHIND A BRASS KNOCKER.

the goods about seven years ago, and a year ago, on his coming of age, I got ten pounds from him just to keep the debt alive. He says you are his solicitor, and will arrange this little affair for him."

"That's right," says Obi; "but first we had better have my solicitor's opinion as to the legality of the claim."

"There can be no doubt about that," says the jeweller; "but let's have it by all means."

"That will be thirteen and fourpence," says our funny man, smiling. "Short dealings make long friendships."

"Oh, very well," says the jeweller, smiling too, only less so, and putting down a pound, change for which the funny man hands him.

"Now," says Obi, "perhaps you will kindly tell us whether a debt contracted before I was of age, and therefore not a debt at all as far as I am concerned, can be kept alive anyhow, it never having really existed?"

"No," says the funny man to the jeweller, "it can't; you're out of it."

And that poor unhappy jeweller is too. Perhaps after all Obi isn't such a fool as he looks.

CHAPTER XII.

THE INSCRUTABLE.

AN old lady—decidedly an old lady—but well preserved—wondrously well preserved. An old lady, but as straight as a dart! An (outwardly) upright old lady. A bolt upright old lady, seemingly built upon principles that make a bolt upright straight-backed chair the most appropriate piece of furniture in all the wide world to fit in with her.

A somewhat heavy-browed old lady, restless of eye, ever on the look-out—one might have fancied, for some coming footstep, bringing dread, and terror, and danger in its creak. Yet why so? She is a well-to do old lady, in quite comfortable circumstances; an independent lady, with some excellent house property in a pious quarter of the town, where moon-shooting is a thing unknown, bailiffs' and brokers' men mere folk-lore, the babble of charwomen hailing from distant places.

Waiting for footsteps; listening with 'bated breath to stray knocks at the door; shivering at the postman's approach, and snatching at such letters as come to her in nervous haste, with trembling fingers, her lips tight gripping the while—her eyes dilated. Such she is, though, surely; such her oft-repeated actions. What does it mean? What secret is there hidden in that shrivelled breast tightly clad in whalebone armour? What crime has she been guilty of?

* * * * *

Long ago—quite twenty years—there was an apple-headed little man,



THE INSCRUTABLE.

THE INSCRUTABLE.

ridiculously rosy, bald, tub-waistcoated, short-legged, gaitered, blue-eyed, vacant, vacillating—an elderly noodle—and he fell in love with our Inscrutable. She had no deadly secret then—at least, there exists no record of a secret of any kind. Little or nothing could be fairly urged against her moral character. To please you, let us say she had not been found out. She was an average kind of woman, with the average number of enemies women mostly have, and among these you must number *his* three daughters, as a matter of course, for not only did he fall in love with her, but he actually married her.

They, the three daughters, had until this event took place been on quite friendly terms with papa—as, indeed, had their husbands, for they were all married. Apple-head was once a comparatively wealthy man. I think we may also number among our heroine's enemies the three husbands.

One day Apple-head fell sick, and seemed to have been visited by some twinge of conscience with respect to the girls. Getting rid of his wife upon some pretext for awhile—they had been married then about twelve years or so, and did not live too happily together—he sent for his daughters and informed them that he would make his will, leaving his property equally between his widow and three daughters. Soon afterwards he died, but no will could be found, and at the funeral the widow produced the key of his iron safe, which was solemnly opened and found absolutely empty. The only explanation which the widow offered was that the poor dear had recently sold all his Consols to pay off an accumulation of debts, and she was ready to pay over to the three girls or their husbands two-thirds of the value of the little furniture, less the funeral expenses. They grumbled, and I fancy the husbands used Saxon, but they took the halfpence; next they quietly consulted a member of the legal persuasion; then they saw the stockbroker, and found that Apple-head had, just before his death, sold securities and received an uncrossed cheque for £590. From the bank they ascertained that the Inscrutable had herself cashed it, and obtained four Bank of England notes, viz., one for £500, one for £50, and two for £20 each, the numbers of each being given. On inquiry at the Bank of England none of the four had been paid in, and they promised to watch for them, and give the solicitor notice, and there the matter rested for three years. Then, at last, one of the notes, a twenty-pounder, fluttered into the Bank of England from an Antwerp bank.

"What will you do?" said they.

"Wait," said the man of law. "It is a pilot balloon."

A month later another twenty-pound note came in through a Yorkshire bank.

"A little nearer," said he; "but we must wait for the big ones." Only he again saw the Bank of England authorities, and requested, should any person present one of the other notes at any time, to detain that person and send for him. Within a week a messenger arrived in a cab. The old

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lady herself had presented the note for £500, and had signed her own name and address in the cashier's book. The solicitor at once rushed down to the bank, caught her, as it were, redhanded, counting the money, and shook hands with her in front of the counter; then put on a detective he had with him to watch her home.

Next morning he calls at Mrs. Mite's, states the case, and asks for the return of the whole of the money. No one can be more indignant than our old lady. *Her* solicitor shall meet him, and the following day the meeting takes place in Ghou Square.

"My client," says her solicitor, "has had a little chat with me, and what is it you want?"

"Five hundred and ninety pounds."

"No less?"

"Not a penny less."

"You must pay it, ma'am," says her solicitor. "You might have got off for two-thirds."

She utters not a word, but rising from her chair, where she has been sitting more bolt upright than ever, places a handful of crumpled notes upon the table. These, with twitching fingers as cold as ice, she straightens out, separates, and hands over one by one. When she has given him the last, he looks up with a faint smile and says, "All right;" and she, still silent, turns from the table and totters slowly from the room.

"Humph!" says the other solicitor, "you've killed her. She'll never get over it."

And true enough from that hour she takes to her bed, never to rise again.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MARRYING MAN.

WITHOUT the prefix of Captain, which more or less belongs to him—as plain Brown, in fact—our matrimonially-disposed military friend might be a comparative failure. As Captain Brown he is a mighty fine gentleman, and a prodigious favourite with the ladies.

There are, I have little doubt—nay, I am sure of it—a lot of Captain Browns in the world, but among them our Captain Brown stands out conspicuously. You have only to drop in at Rooky's, or Crow's, or Charley Panton's, and ask the first middle-aged man you come across whether he knows Captain Brown, and then lean back and listen to what he has to say. It is not always a safe thing to put down people's true characters on paper, but, as a rule, you may say pretty well what you like, true or untrue, about any one if you say it only to their friends.



CAPTAIN BROWN.

THE MARRYING MAN.

"Brown!—Brown! To be sure, I ought to know him!" says my good friend Ricketts, whom I consult upon the subject. "Fellow about my age. Was in the —th, and had to sell out. Caught with the king of clubs in his lap under his pocket-handkerchief. Brown! to be sure; but he wasn't Brown then, nor quite a Captain. He called himself White. Change of colour, that's all. Know him? Rather! Why, if I were to tell you half I know of him you could fill a book. Did you ever hear * * *?" And the good gentleman, whose own antecedents, lightly touched upon in Stubbs's Court Guide, it must be owned, have a fishlike flavour about them, dashes off into our Captain's biography, and keeps on at it for a good hour at least.

Our Captain is a patron of the drama, and somehow or other is possessed of unbounded "paper." The stalls and boxes at the music halls are also graced by his presence, and the Lion Comics and Leviathan Drolls are to him "Georgy, old man," "Joey," or "Jimmy, old son," and affably hob-nob with him at the bar. No racecourse would be complete without our Captain, or the Camp at Wimbledon, or the Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race, and at any large assembly almost, entrance to which is obtainable without getting vouchers or showing a marriage certificate, you may safely count upon meeting with the Captain, whose restless rat's eyes travel over the faces of the crowd, missing no one he wishes to see. Also it is pleasant to note how everywhere youth and innocence goes arm in arm with him, hangs upon his honied words, and lends him money freely. For the fair-haired guileless boys of birth he gets bills done, and they are grateful to him. Should not they be?

Have you ever been to the United Vultures? It is not a loan office of which I speak, but a club—the latest and youngest of clubs, where the mashing Johnnies do congregate and play cards till day dawns. I once sat there until the small hours in the morning contemplating these white-faced children at their childish sports and pastimes, and listening to their pretty prattle: it *is* prattle, and pretty. I do not play myself because I have no money. No more has Brown; but that is another matter. The eldest of the children may be twenty-three—not a year older. And Brown is fifty, perhaps, wonderfully well preserved. It was pleasant to see these lambkins and hobbledehoys quaffing lemon-squashes and listening to Brown's good stories. At the U.V. after a certain hour the packs of cards cost money; but who cares? Not Brown, anyhow. "What an ass I was!" says little Spoonbill next day as he sits, sick and penitent, in front of a golden herring, the saltiest procurable. "How tight I was! I wonder what I lost, and how I got home? Well, I shall turn it up; it's too good enough." But that very night, in the lobby of the Frivolity, where he goes from his stall to smoke, little Spoonbill meets our Captain quite by accident, and they go to the U.V. to sup, and Spoonbill stays just for one round. * * *

BEHIND A BEASS KNOCKER.

But what, in the name of all that is unlikely, brings the Captain to our little menagerie Behind the Brass Knocker? There is nothing at all unlikely in it. He is not the only wolf in captain guise that prowleth east, west, north, and south, among the gentle sheep and lambs folded in London boarding-houses. Our Captain would wed wealth if he can come across it. There is, to be sure, a Mrs. Brown already, but she is not likely to interfere.

Have you ever taken a stroll in the neighbourhood of Fulham, among the few old-fashioned lanes that Buggins the builder and his merry men have not as yet lain hands on? There you may now and again alight on some rare red brick mansion, sleepily dozing in the shade, among flower-beds ablaze with scarlet, half hidden by noble trees full of nests. In such a house Mrs. Brown wears away the rest of the life she has left to live, buried alive, and already clean forgotten, unloved. *She is in a madhouse, and they call her mad.*

CHAPTER XIV.

THE EMINENTLY RESPECTABLE.

“**H**E do buy a lot o’ hink. An’ don’t he splash it about too, neither! The carpet by the winder, ma’am, it’s somethink awful!”

Thus Hemma, the maid, sitting in judgment upon our Eminently Respectable boarder. We have had “perfect gentlemen” by the score; all new borders are, more or less, perfect gentlemen, according to our poor Mite, when they first appear upon the scene, though towards the close of their stay with us some of them fall off a little. But Mr. Merks, it is at once decided without question, is Eminently Respectable. There is nothing showy about him; indeed, his appearance might almost be described as of that of shabby gentility, and there is a pinched and hungry look upon him that should have struck terror into the soul of the poor lady who finds us board and lodging. The first superficial glance we took at him led to the conclusion that he was a harmless nobody, not particularly well off, and we hoped Mrs. Mite’s money would be all right, a charitable wish we are possibly a little over-given to expressing about one another. I rather think we were inclined the first few minutes to snub and ignore the elderly stranger; but somehow, without unduly forcing himself, he glides into the general conversation, and presently the whole table is listening to him attentively and with marked respect. Somehow it had been a question of what was the title of Lord What’shisname’s elder brother, and Mr. Merks, speaking very gently but very distinctly, supplies the information required, and the majority of us, on hearing that it is the Earl of What’sit, exclaim *en masse*, “Tut! tut! To be sure!”

Mr. Merks continues, suavely, “A most excellent man—a most charitable



OUR EMINENTLY RESPECTABLE.

THE EMINENTLY RESPECTABLE.

man. Subscribes to everything—everything! Not,” he continues in a graver tone, “that I advocate miscellaneous almsgiving.”

Some of us are just a little doubtful whether we fully realize his meaning, but our Champion Wolfist, the Gobbling Changeling, looks up from his plate, and, beaming through a framework of gravy, says decisively, “No, never give a farthing to beggars in the street. Never did. Pack of swindlers!”

“There is, unhappily, no gainsaying the fact,” says Mr. Merks, “that there is a vast amount of imposture existing among the applicants for charity one casually encounters in one’s walks abroad.”

“Rather,” says a shrewd-looking, red-haired gentleman on the opposite side of the table; “I’m the secretary of the Charity Combination, and I’ve reason to know something of that.”

Mr. Merks looks very hard at the other boarder, and smiles slightly. And now Mrs. Topperton takes her place in the general conversation, and enumerates the most charitable amongst the county gentry in that part of the world where sucking-pigs come from, among them a Sir Joseph we most of us have heard long tales about before.

“Ah!” says Mr. Merks, with another smile, one this time of pleased recognition, “Kettlepot Hall, I think? I am well acquainted with his brother, Mr. Samuel.”

“Seems to know everybody’s brother!” my immediate neighbour whispers to me.

In truth, Mr. Merks seems to know a vast number of persons of position intimately, and has apparently travelled over the greater part of England. He and Mrs. Topperton, upon the strength of his acquaintance with Mr. Samuel, Sir Joseph’s brother, become staunch friends, and talk Sucking-pigshire by the hour together. Secondhand we glean some particulars of Mr. Merks’ past. He was born the heir to a large property, and was at one time the possessor of a hall and a park, a pack of hounds and racers; but unfortunate speculations, for which he himself is not the least bit to blame, have made him a poor man.

“Yes, a poor man, madam; but proud. I cannot be a beggar, or there are those in our family who have enough and to spare—those who owe me name and position, nay, more. But I cannot beg, and, thank God, there is no occasion. A man who stoops as low as that is, to my thinking, the most despicable of creatures. I would rather starve.”

“Well, I don’t go as far as that,” says Mrs. Topperton; “it must be a cruel thing to have to do. I, in my old age, would find it bitterly hard, I am sure; but what if there be no other resource? Well, there, I sent a few shillings to a poor wretched creature who wrote to me only yesterday, and, Heaven knows, I could hardly afford it. If I hadn’t, I shouldn’t have slept a wink all night, so I gained that way, anyhow.”

BEHIND A BRASS KNOCKER.

One day a middle-aged, strongly-built, stiff-necked, soldier-like man calls, and asks for Mr. Merks. Oddly enough, it is his first and last and only visitor, and they quite quietly leave the house together, walk through the square arm-in-arm, and are seen no more.

Some one (our 'Melia, I think) shortly afterwards finds a small memorandum-book secreted between the mattresses in what was Mr. Merks' room, containing some strange entries. These are two of them :—

"*March 2.*—Rev. John Jones ; good sort, two quid. Respec trades burnt out day after insurance lapsed. Knew his brother William at Glossop.

"Captain Brown, Clifton Cottage. Not good enough. Had before. Nautical fake, Brumgem."

Our Eminently Respectable friend was a begging-letter-writer, that is all, and the police have got him at last.

CHAPTER XV.

OUR LOPSIDED LUNATIC.

"**L**AWKS a mercy me !" cries Mrs. Topperton, "that unhappy man is everlastingly on the skiwivil !"

Our Mrs. Topperton has a language of her own, therefore I don't feel called upon to explain with any great degree of exactitude the amount of crookedness implied by the term used ; but one thing is certain, our Lopsided Lunatic is chronically askew and all of a twist, and has a habit of roosting on one leg like a stork.

"And what, in the name of everything that's horrid," says Mrs. Topperton, "has the wretched creature done to his head ?"

"What, indeed ?" That is the question we ask each other the first night he comes amongst us, for he is terribly bald. Not bald in the usual way. There is no fringe of hair round the sides of his head. He is as bald as a billiard-ball, and he has no eyebrows or eyelashes, and not a speck of beard. And what is more, his head is the colour of a very young baby's.

It is an awkward thing to ask him about, for he is a man of few words on any subject, and is particularly reticent on this. He says nothing about his head. We are good pumpers, particularly the ladies, and work at him hard. We keep on asking him whether he feels the draught, and when he says no, we say we notice a slight draught ourselves, and presume that he must be even more susceptible to its influence than we are. He only says he feels none, and there the matter drops. But, though he says very little, he is evidently a big thinker. A profoundly meditative expression pervades our Lopsided One's countenance. The places where his eyebrows ought to be are ever knitted, his eyes fixed upon vacancy, conjuring up the far-off future.



OUR LOPSIDED LUNATIC.

OUR LOPSIDED LUNATIC.

Twisting himself up into the shape of an &, with his lower limbs twined round each other, and the chair-legs as though they were the tendrils of a creeper, with his chin stuck forward, his back bowed out, and one shoulder hitched up a foot higher than the other, he will sit by the hour together, covering a sheet of foolscap paper with all kinds of odd shapes and circles, semicircles, squares, right-angles, triangles, all sorts of angles, and others besides, joining each other, crossing, mixed up, as it appears to an outsider, in hopeless confusion, like Euclid gone mad.

Is our Lopsided One insane? I don't think so—at least, not more mad than most of us. He is an inventor of patents, that is all—patents that people won't take up, or which, when he brings them before the public at his own expense, other people instantaneously set to work to improve upon, and so rob him of his rights. A kind of patent pioneer.

During the day he is very little at home, and for the most part may be found haunting the Law Courts, the flowery fields of Lincoln's Inn, the shady Lane of Chancery, and the pleasant old hostelrys of Staple, Barnard, Serjeant, and Furnival, whose genial hosts tender him a smiling welcome in cozy nooks up well-worn staircases that have for a century or more creaked beneath the soles of cheerful clients going up and down—perhaps oftener more so beneath the weight of the latter.

Shall I tell you how our Lopsided One comes to be as bald as he is—for I know, and can tell if I choose? Well, then, I will.

All kinds of ingenious things has he been the inventor of. A corkscrew, a bed-wrench, a hat-peg (portable), an umbrella-fastener, and an umbrella-stand, a cooking-stove, and a refrigerator. It is the oddest thing in the world to watch him. His mind must be ever at work, anthill-like. I saw him one day pick up a common wooden match and examine it minutely, hold it at arm's length and rivet his eyes upon it, glare at it fiercely, frown at it gloomily, cast it to a distance with an expression of withering scorn, fall himself all of a heap shapeless into a chair, clutching his baldness in frenzied desperation, while his body squirmed and his legs twined octopus-like round the neighbouring furniture; then of a sudden, with, as it were, a glow of inspiration on his face, dash at the match, clutch it eagerly, pocket it and laugh, then slip on his hat and fly from the house.

He had conceived an idea of improving upon that match, and meant to do so without loss of time.

But it is on a new motive power on which he expends most of his time and his best thoughts, and it is in the working out of the machinery of this motive power that he fills such a lot of sheets of paper, that is to say, upon certain improvements, for the motive power has been tried once, and that is *why he is bald!*

Picture to yourself the brightest and most sunshiny of mornings. A choice gathering of scientific and literary gentlemen and wealthy capitalists.

BEHIND A BRASS KNOCKER.

A champagne lunch in the background laid out in the best room of the hotel. Meanwhile, in a hastily constructed wooden shed is hidden the machinery of the motive power, which two warm-looking men and a sticky boy are oiling with feathers and polishing with rags, until such time as our inventor shall begin his explanations. Silence, please! He has begun. "Gentlemen, although this invention is intended to supersede steam, I have thought it advisable on this occasion to employ steam, or rather to have steam, as it were, in reserve, in case it should prove that we are not yet in all particulars quite in working order. Steam has been hitherto upheld as a mighty power; but I intend to prove that for the future——"

But here there is a big bang, and the greater part of the roof of the shed flies skywards, taking the sticky boy with it, whilst literature, science, and capital roll over each other and tumble out at the door; and in the middle of the shed, amidst the wreck and ruin, shrieking and writhing, twisting and twining in terrible agony, most horribly scalded, lies the pooh-pooh of steam!

"But I've got it all right now," he says to me one day, "*and next Tuesday week we are going to have another experiment; will you come?*"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE SCISSORS SWALLOWER.

"**W**HERE'S the scissors?"

It is quite a common question at Mrs. Mite's. Strict grammarians—there are such persons about—might ask, "Where *are* the scissors?"—just as there are people who call out "I" outside the door when you ask them who is there. Behind the Brass Knocker, however, it has been hitherto found to be good enough to ask "where's the scissors?" And, for that matter, in whatever form you might have thought fit to ask for them, the result would have been pretty well the same—the scissors are for ever lost, and can nowhere be found.

Of course, you can understand one particular pair of scissors is not here indicated. By scissors, I mean everybody's scissors—the scissors of the united household—and every lady member of it, and, indeed, a few of the gentlemen even, are wont to invest in pair after pair of scissors with quite reckless prodigality. But they all go rapidly—all mysteriously disappear, as though some one had swallowed them.

Do you remember that wonderful tale told of the contents of the stomach of a certain voracious shark in the pathetic melodrama of *Black Eyed Susan*? Have you ever read the "Book of Wonderful and Eccentric Characters"? Have you ever been to the Surgeons' Museum in Lincoln's Inn Fields?



THE SCISSORS SWALLOWER.

THE WOMAN WE DON'T UNDERSTAND.

Among the thrilling items contained in that singular collection of curiosities and monstrosities may be found a small group of partly-digested knives—dreadful things—some of them with four blades, and a corkscrew, and that implement to pull stones out of a horse's hoof, which comes in so useful to people who ride habitually on the knifeboards of busses or on penny steamers. These had been swallowed for a wager by a cheerful nautical person, with whose digestive arrangements they eventually disagreed, abbreviating what must otherwise have been a useful and instructive life.

Behind the shadow of the Brass Knocker resided a certain aged, shrivelled, high-dried old lady, who earned the reputation of the Scissors Swallower, and was strongly suspected not only of swallowing everybody else's scissors she could lay hands on, but pairs upon pairs she had purchased herself.

The unpleasantness therefrom arising—externally I mean, of course—it would take pages to describe,—terrible personalities, accusations, threats of policemen even, and finally the loss of many good boarders to poor dear long-suffering little Mite. But in the end comes the solution to the mystery. The old lady dies. There is a demand for a *post mortem* examination among the other boarders, but the doctor objects, and ascribes the death to natural causes.

The old lady has left a will, and it bequeathes her favourite arm-chair (her own property) to Mrs. Mite.

"I'll have it re-covered," says she, and she herself sets to ripping off the worn-out leather, revealing the stuffing below.

The stuffing below! What think you it was composed of? Horsehair, to be sure, and springs more or less damaged, and—*fifty-three pairs of scissors that had somehow slipped down through the crevices in the woodwork!*

CHAPTER XVII.

THE WOMAN WE DON'T UNDERSTAND.

WE all thought that he, at least, must have had some feeble glimmering of the truth. But no; nobody understood her—never had—never would.

It must be very miserable to be thus! To wander through crowds alone. To sit apart, smouldering, as it were, whilst the giddy throng cracks the empty joke-shell and laughs the hollow laugh. What sayest thou? Ah! thou, too, canst laugh hollowly also. Ha! ha!

This is scarcely the age for attitudinizing. There's so much pushing from behind. You should have money and patience too, if you intend to pose as Manfred & Co. Byron lived and died at the right time.

No, dullards that we are, we don't understand her; and, as likely as not,

BEHIND A BRASS KNOCKER.

take her for something wholly different to what she really is. To us she is a woman past thirty, who must have been very pretty. She is well educated, and has the manners of good society. She is calm and collected, and as ready-witted as Mrs. Mite herself. To the other ladies she is reticent—indeed, she scarcely ever exchanges aught but the briefest common-places with any of the boarders, male or female, with one exception.

The one exception is Mr. Dodderington. To Mr. Dodderington her life is devoted. There lies between the two some distant relationship. She is a kind of ward of his; he a kind of guardian of hers; and a filial, paternal affection exists between them which is charming—nay, touching even—to see.

Mr. Dodderington is one of Mrs. Mite's best boarders—another of those "perfect gentlemen" we hear so much of; but this time really a gentleman—the right thing. When Mr. Dodderington departs this life—he is well on in years, and ever ailing—she will be well provided for. We know this much because he has more than once publicly proclaimed the fact, on which occasion, with playful tenderness, she has lain her hand upon his mouth, and in soft tones, in which tears trembled, bade him say no more. To all appearance their affection for one another would seem to be of years' standing. We were quite surprised one day to hear that it was only six months ago they met.

At the first blush this fact would scarcely appear to tally with the statement she has made that he knew her when a child, though literally this is the truth. She was a baby when he last saw her mother, and some family difference has separated them for years. At length he advertised for a companion. She answered the advertisement, not dreaming who it was she was about to see, and thus strangely they came together.

All this we gather piecemeal from various sources, and also learn that he is a widower,—that his wife has been dead twenty years, and that he has a son living, who is somewhere abroad, and with whom he has quarrelled. Very bitterly he speaks of this boy when at times the conversation leads up to the subject of ingratitude, and with scathing irony he dilates upon the shallowness of the repentance of returning prodigals. No fatted calf will Dodderington prepare for the slaughter when this scapegrace crawls homewards, tattered and worn and weary-footed.

"A stout stick for the backs of the like of them!" the old gentleman cries, clenching a thin hand that shakes with excitement. "A thick stick, a thick stick!"

"Oh, no! oh, no!" cries his companion. "You do not mean that. You are too good, too kind, too noble! I know you better than you know yourself."

"Know me!" cries the old gentleman. "Pooh! what do you know of me?"



A LITTLE INCIDENT.

"I only judge you, sir, by your conduct to me and to all others you come in contact with, that is all."

Her hand outstretched reaches his, and his hand closes on it. There is a moment's silence, in which he sits with downcast eyes, and the lids quiver ever so slightly. Presently in a furtive fashion he wipes something off his cheek, and coughs and laughs.

"I'm not as young as I used to be," says he. "That's funny, isn't it?" and he laughs again a little foolishly.

One fine day, when the shining sun stretching itself to its utmost is almost threateningly within reach of the Brass Knocker, a postman steps in between and rat-tats. He brings a letter in a cheap and shabby envelope, directed in a slovenly hand, and badly spelt. There is a circular mark upon the back which has not been placed there by the post-office authorities, but some one seemingly has rested a part of a pewter pot in its immediate vicinity, and the pressure of one portion with its coating of sticky beer has left this impression. The letter is directed to Mr. Dodderington, but our much-mistaken heroine ordinarily receives and hands to the old gentleman the communications addressed to him. There are so many people send him begging letters, and he is so open-handed, an arrangement of this kind is really positively necessary, and is with his full approval carried out.

"Ah," says he, looking up from his chair—his gout is bad to-day,—
"another hungry mouth to fill, eh? Another whining rascal? Read it, my dear."

She does so, and her knees totter under her, and her face grows ghastly white. "Well?" says he, interrogatively, and without raising his eyes; "well? Another of 'em?"

"Ye-es."

He is in no hurry—not particularly interested, indeed, and still waits. "Well," he repeats at last, "am I to give him anything? How much?"

He has taken up a book by this time, finds his place, and is reading. He smiles; he has forgotten all about the begging letter.

"No," she says, in a low, harsh tone, crushing the letter between her clenched fingers; "no, no, no!"

"Eh?" says he, but she has walked silently away, and he goes on reading and smiling: it is a highly humorous passage he has come across.

A day or two later some other boarder bursts in upon the fag end of what must surely have been almost a sensation scene. She is flying from the room, weeping in her pocket-handkerchief. "Oh, no! oh, no!" says she, "it cannot be!" He, left behind, looks sheepish—humiliated—crushed!

But when the menagerie assemble upon the battle-field—at dinner-time, I mean—he is radiant, and she placidly happy. A buzz goes round, heaven knows where started, that *he has proposed to her—that they are to be married.*

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The next morning she cuts and dries the *Times* as it is her wont to do before handing it to him, and he settles himself to read it. A moment later he rises with a sudden scream, and the paper drops from his hands. Some one rushes forward to catch him before he falls, and presently he is carried upstairs head first, to very soon be carried feet first out past the Brass Knocker to a far-off graveyard.

It was a letter from that prodigal son of his in the last extremity of misery begging for help, which she had suppressed, and it was the account of the inquest on his body the father had read. There was no will, and she is left a beggar.

Ugly, eh?

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE DABCHICKS.

“HAPPY those early days when I shined in my angel infancy!” (I am, if you please, a humble literary person, quoting from authors of eminence upon Childhood.) “Living jewels are children dropped unstained from heaven!” “Thy mother’s joy, thy father’s hope—thou bright pure dwelling, where two fond hearts keep their gladness!” “Few things appear so beautiful as a young child in its shroud——”

“Now, then! Confound you! There! I’ve missed you this time, but just you wait till I get you by the ear! What-for doesn’t describe it, my young and agile friend!”

* * * * *

It is a Dabchick I thus address. It is seldom that children are found abiding behind our Brass Knocker: as a rule, children are much objected to—looked upon, indeed, as an acquired taste hardly worth acquiring; but somehow Mrs. Dabchick has found shelter here for a while for herself and her tender olive-branches—DRAT ’EM!

I should just like to introduce the rabidest lover of children to the Dabchicks. “Sharp little things” are they. High-pressure babes! Fiendishly precocious! Appallingly up to snuff! Look at them, will you? The girl has her back turned toward you; but note the eager hatchet-faced aspect of that impish boy! What are they whispering about? You may well ask. Some devilish mischief are they concocting; and presently shall we hear the cries of the wounded, the gnashing of teeth, and the vow of vengeance. Stay! I wrong them. There is nothing of the madcap, mischief-loving child in their composition. They play no tricks. They laugh not out loudly. They romp not, nor break breakables. Old people could not be more circumspect. They are pinks of propriety, sound their h’s, turn their toes out, use their pocket-handkerchiefs when requisite without being told



THE DEADLY SECRET.

THE RUNAWAY COUPLE.

to do so, crumble their bread instead of cutting it, say grace when called upon, and their prayers most likely when left to themselves. Good children! and what a blessing to their mother! Bah! I could slap them both till they were black and blue!

How should one correct a bad child? Since the beginning of time ladies—particularly maiden ladies—have laid down the law with regard to the training of children, and some say *slap* and some say *soothe*. How can you raise your hand and let it fall upon the little shrinking wretch with fixed white face set up at you, with eyes in which are strangely mingled rage and terror, with tender limbs that one could quite easily snap with little more than pressure of finger and thumb? Strike! *I* could not. But what *are* you to do? How tackle the Dabchicks?

Pasty-faced, big-eyed brats are they, who fix you by the hour together, and read your inmost thoughts. Nothing misses them. Mrs. Topperton's bad grammar, employed in a little speech she makes on one of her sucking-pig days; when we are all feeding at her expense, passed along the table in a stealthy whisper by the Dabchick girl, promotes a huge amount of chuckling. Anon the Dabchick boy becomes possessed of a document (he says he found it on the stairs) which purports to be a summons to a low, common county court, addressed to our funny gentleman by a tailor person he has dealt with and left unpaid. It is sent round, and we all read it, and, with much ingenuity, at dinner-time cause the conversation to revert again and again to tailors and their charges. Our funny gentleman is not quite as funny as usual this evening. He winces now and again.

But Mrs. Dabchick falls ill, and we are all alarmed about her. A genuine pity for the children is felt. They are petted; even *I* am half ashamed of my hostility. Mrs. Mite naturally is averse to people dying on the premises, and is glad when the mother and her babes depart for some seaside place where she expects the air will do wonders. It does not, for she dies. Mrs. Mite, a tender-hearted simpleton, goes down to see the orphans, and they give her quite a graphic account of the ceremonies attached to events of this kind.

"*And I saw they didn't take ma's ring,*" the little girl Dabchick says, with a nod of the head and a cunning sparkle in her eyes, "*nor her teeth! I've got 'em.*"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE RUNAWAY COUPLE.

I WAS walking down a suburban lane the other morning, the budding hedges on each side of which smelt sweetly, whilst overhead, in the branches of high trees, the birds were singing a joyous chorus to the sun.

BEHIND A BRASS KNOCKER.

In front of me walked a man with a stick, who of a sudden stopping, stooped, took careful aim, and struck something round and dark-coloured from a green twig on which it rested, to the ground, where it rolled in the dust.

"The first bee I've seen this season," he said to me, with a bland smile ; "and a whopper, too !"

He had struck it dead.

The man was a stranger to me. I had never seen him before. I hope, if by chance he reads this, he will understand that the expression on my face was that of disgust and not approval of his wanton, idiotic act. What manner of man was this? Whence came he? Where was he going to? Poor blundering bee to get in his way ! "The first he had seen that season, and a whopper, too !" And so the first bee this brute saw he felt it his duty to put to death, and then went whistling on his way light-hearted, and forgot all about it.

The first time I saw little Mrs. Honeyman she was killing flies. Now, don't set me down for a sentimentalist ! I have little or no sympathy with flies. I see no use in them. They are a nuisance, and born for no other reason than to make an income for fly-paper manufacturers and the philanthropical patentees of beastly cruel fly-traps. Flies ought to be killed, and, I have reason to believe, they themselves are perfectly aware of the necessity of their extermination, and philosophically contemplate the massacre of their parents, their sisters, their aunts, and their cousins, and buzz around the place of execution, filled with contentment and replete with joy.

There are times and seasons for fly-killing, and ways of doing it, that are legitimate and sanctioned by long observance. But Mrs. Honeyman was killing flies out of mere wanton cruelty as a pastime. I'll swear to it ! I came upon her suddenly, and she coloured up when she caught my eye, and desisted from the ugly occupation with which her lithe white fingers were busy.

She and young Honeyman are our Runaway Couple. We set them down as runaways from the very first. Washed-out, colourless creatures, it is only their youth and newly-marriedness that lends the faintest interest to their existence. Neither he nor she are, in one sense, "fair" to look upon ; but they are light haired, freckled, and thinly eyelashed. Terribly insignificant, and weak, and puny are they, with just courage enough, I should say, to drown a trapped mouse, or strength to catch a fly and pull its legs off.

What could *she* have seen in *him* ? the male boarders ask one another ; and the female boarders ask what could *he* have seen in *her* ? Both questions the impartial looker-on might find it difficult to answer. What is there in either of them or about them to excite passing interest even—much less love ? And yet, for a whole month past, the menagerie behind the Brass Knocker has been thrown, by their presence, into a constant state of fever and ferment.



THE RUNAWAYS.

THE RUNAWAY COUPLE.

There is, indeed, something very mysterious about the Honeymans. Most unquestionably they are a runaway couple, and show all the symptoms of a couple in fear of being followed, pounced upon, and run in again.

Double knocks make them change colour, start, and tremble. They are for ever whispering, not love nonsense, but in an affrighted, breathless fashion, round corners, and fly for their lives, like scared rabbits, at the approach of man.

As to conversational powers in general company, they have not a word to say for themselves, and all efforts to draw them out fail signally. Cornered, they subside into silence and simply do not answer. An awkward pause, during which they blush or whiten, and the interviewing comes to an end. The secret of their flitting, if there be a secret, and assuredly such is the case, they intend to keep close locked within their breasts.

We hold a consultation respecting the runaways, and the general opinion is that Mrs. Mite's conduct in taking them without more strict inquiry was reprehensible in the extreme; a vote of censure is put, and carried without a dissentient voice, and the poor fluttering Mite, presently placed in the dock and asked what she has to say ere sentence be passed on her, explains that they came to her as young and unprotected strangers from beyond the seas, with luggage bearing railway labels of Liverpool; that they seemed so very young, so very innocent, so very helpless and forlorn, she could not find it in her heart, etcetera.

"Perhaps," says she, with a feeble sparkle as of intelligence—craftiness even—"I had better ask them plainly——"

We smile in chorus at Mite's simplicity. As though *we* had not tried—as though *she* could succeed where *we* had failed!

One day suddenly the curtain rises in our midst upon the first act of a melodrama. At dinner-time Mr. Honeyman does not come home as usual. He has been as usual to the City, and in the evening has promised to pay the week's bill—the previous weeks' have been regularly paid. Mrs. Honeyman supposes "he will be here directly." But dinner-time passes, the evening, the night, the next day, and the next pass also, and yet he comes not. The lady boarders are violently agitated, and in a crowd gather round the "relict," so to speak, of the Honeyman departed, full of sympathetic curiosity.

But even under these trying circumstances the pale mystery maintains its composure, puts Mrs. Mite off with a plausible tale, introduces upon the scene the name of a rich uncle, who must have detained Mr. Honeyman. Mr. Honeyman has no doubt gone down into the country to seek his bedside. Doubtless Uncle is worse—he has been very, very ill a long while past. We find it very difficult to accept Uncle unreservedly. Why doesn't young Mr. Honeyman write or telegraph?

A week passes, during which Mrs. Honeyman does not leave the house—indeed, scarcely quits her own apartment. The lady boarders eye her

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askance ; she is sent to Coventry. Mrs. Mite, in confidence, tells somebody that if the relict would only turn her back a minute she would dearly like to see what is in the boxes. "Bricks, most likely," responds her confidante, cheerfully ; "are they screwed to the floor?"

Act II.—A doubtful double knock. A lady in black, closely veiled, wants to see the lady of the house. Mrs. Mite hastily titivates and rehearses rapidly the "home comforts" and other inducements. It is a new boarder, of course.

"You have my daughter here !" cries the visitor, distractedly wringing her hands, "my cruel, wicked, heartless girl, that robbed me of my little all, and ran away with a worthless fellow—who—who will not care for her long ! Where is she ? Where are they both ?"

Mrs. Mite cannot readily tell the weeping mother where Mr. Honeyman is. No more, indeed, can Mrs. Honeyman tell much, except that it is not Liverpool she came from, but a suburb scarcely two miles distant ; that the uncle was but a myth ; that she knew no more of Honeyman than that she met him in an omnibus and was married to him three weeks afterwards at a registrar's office, and knew no more of his affairs than what he had chosen to tell her, which was nothing ; and that she broke open her mother's money-box at his suggestion. She knew and told this much, though, and that he had robbed her, too, of her little trinkets, and of every farthing she had stolen from home. *And, beggared beyond all hope, the two women pass, hand-in-hand, across the threshold, where the Brass Knocker seems to grin grimly down upon their tear-swollen eyes, that in shame seek the pavement.*

CHAPTER XX.

THE SILENT LADY.

MYSTERIOUS ladies abound in the realms of fiction, and there have been a few in real life—most of them mad. When I was a little boy, I had pointed out to me a wild-looking elderly woman, dressed in shabby mourning, who rambled through the City streets, or hung about round the Bank, nodding her head and muttering to herself. A harmless creature enough, though given at times to brief fits of impotent rage, in which it was her habit to shrilly accuse the Bank authorities, on whose charity she mostly lived, of robbing her. One day, upon the Stock Exchange, she attacked the great Baron Rothschild himself in the middle of business, calling him a villain and a robber, and telling him he had defrauded her of her fortune, demanded payment on the spot of the two thousand pounds he owed her. The Baron, as well as most City men, knew her well. He quietly put a half-crown in her hand, bade her not



IN THE WAY.

THE SILENT LADY.

bother him any more just then, and promised to pay her the remainder on the morrow. She thanked him and went quietly away. Yesterdays and to-morrows were all alike to poor mad Sarah Whitehead—the “Bank Nun,” or “Rouge et Noir,” as she was sometimes called on account of her painted face. When her brother, who had been a Bank of England clerk, was found guilty of forgery and sentenced to death, his young sister, then scarcely twenty, was kept in total ignorance of everything that was happening (the guilty man being represented as absent on a journey), and she was removed from her house near Newgate Street to the house of a friend in Wine Office Court, in order that on the day of his execution she should not hear the tolling of St. Sepulchre’s bell. They still kept the secret from her; but at length, however, unable to account for her brother’s continued absence from home, Miss Whitehead went to ask at the Bank, where an unthinking fellow-clerk blurted out the whole story. She neither spoke a word nor shed a tear; in one moment the shock overturned her mind, and smiling, she was led passively away quite mad; and for more than twenty-five years she wandered about the streets, living on the charity of friends. There was, after her death, a thrilling romance, published in penny weekly numbers, called “The Lady in Black”—some twenty years or so, perhaps, before Mr. Wilkie Collins wrote his “Woman in White.”

There is a mysterious lady living in the select boarding-house of which the Brass Knocker is the guardian angel. She is not mad, but the other ladies call her strange. She is the Silent Lady, and only close-mouthed Mrs. Mite knows anything about her. Surely no Old Bailey lawyer’s iron safe ever encompassed a larger collection of compromising secrets than the skimpetty material encircling that portion of our little Mite’s body where her heart is supposed to be. And she alone knows aught of the Silent Lady’s secret—yet knows not all. There is nothing compromising in the secret as far as the Silent Lady herself is concerned. She has committed no crime—is committing none, except, perhaps, that of overliving her time. And yet she is still quite young—clever, undoubtedly—and good-looking. She calls herself Mrs. Smith, but it is *not* her name. She wears a wedding-ring upon the third finger of her left hand; but she *is* married. The Mr. Smith that should be is a shining light in high places, an exemplary man, beyond the influence of the small, pitiful, feverish passions that hold such as you and I slaves, and lash us shapeless, like reeds in a gale. His name is set up in capitals on the show-bills of daily papers, and his words and deeds commented on in leading articles. It is a great thing indeed to be as great as the Mr. Smith that should be, and to owe your position in life to your own undeniable worth, which an appreciative public has only properly recognized. On platforms Mr. Smith has told us (how often we have heard the like from after-dinner orators!) that he was a self-made man, and owes his rise in life to his own unaided exertions, bidding his auditors take

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example by him—do as he has done, and prosper. As his stirring words fall upon his listeners' ears, their hearts throb with new-born hope. There is, then, a future, and it may be theirs; and then cheer after cheer bursts forth, and the rafters ring with deafening shouts. There is only one person in the world who could step upon the platform and give this wind-bag the lie, could show him to be the sham he is, could tear off the tossing feathers from the shallow mongrel's head, and, in half a dozen words, blast his good name for ever. But the person who could do this is our Silent Lady, and *she* is dumb.

Are there many women like her, and any men? *He* is the world's idol and spoilt child of fortune; and *she* is nothing—nobody—not even Mrs. Smith. Yet *she* made him. She takes a small sum, and gives up a name she has a legal right to: what value was there in the name—to her? She takes a certain sum to live apart from him and not bother. She might get a divorce; at one time he would have wished she would, when his name was not so much in peoples' mouths as now.

But that she refused to do: you see, she is, after all, like other women—only a woman, after all. Her death alone can set him quite free and make the OTHER WOMAN happy.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE NIGHT PROWLER.

“IT is a party by the name of Ffinch as you must mean?”

Our Nondescript—the boy of doubtful age and dim surroundings—the dweller in subterranean chambers who “knows what beetles mean,” as our funny gentleman puts it,—it is our Nondescript who speaks. A boy is questioning him respecting an old gentleman who has just been into his master's shop to look at walking-sticks, and who left an old and worthless one there, and carried off two new ones by accident instead. His master sent him, with the old walking-stick, to follow the gentleman home.

It is Mr. Ffinch, true enough, who has done this thing. His niece, a sharp-eyed young woman of about twenty-five, explains that it is all a stupid mistake—Mr. Ffinch is so dreadfully forgetful and absent-minded. He really ought not to be trusted out alone.

I know not what description the boy from the walking-stick shop may have given of Mr. Ffinch's personal appearance to ensure his recognition, but Mr. Ffinch's exterior *is* peculiar, and may be thus described:—An ugly old man certainly, with a pinched-up wizen look upon him—monkey-faced he might be called. Bald head, with fluffy hair sticking out at the sides, spectacles, and black stock the worse for wear. Dress coat, tight under the arms; satin waistcoat, very short; short legged, weak kneed, flat feet, toes



THE PROWLER.

THE NIGHT PROWLER.

turned out too much. A red cotton pocket handkerchief, which, when he has his hat off, he carries in his hand, and when he has his hat on he carries in the crown of it. Have you ever, in wild moments of feverish dissipation, visited a haunt of utter abandonment entitled the Royal Institution? Any day you may find him there—his prototype, I should rather say—for the whereabouts of this party by the name of Ffinch at this moment I wot not of. I only know that he is numbered among the pale ghosts of evil things that once were.

* * * * *

I have lost several small sums of money, and, after thinking the matter well over, have concluded that I shall be right in attributing my losses to a newly-purchased pair of lined gloves. I have long had a habit—I have nothing to urge in its favour—of going bare handed; but the weather is cold, and so I have bought a pair of stout kid gloves warmly lined. They, without my hands in them, make quite a pocketful, and yet they are not loose, and are a trouble to take off and pull on again. Now, I have another habit, for which I can offer no defence, and that is: in winter-time I carry money in a small outside pocket the tailor made, he told me, to carry railway tickets in. But I do not carry railway tickets in it because I have found that they drop out or wriggle themselves maliciously under the lapel, so that I am driven to desperation and despair searching for them when the time comes. But I keep my loose silver in the small pocket, and I suppose, fumbling about with the thick gloves, I manage to pull it out and drop it in the darkness.

However, the cold weather passes away, and I leave off the overcoat and gloves, yet—I still lose money.

I turn the matter over, and my suspicions fall on Mrs. Mite's yellow-haired daughter, a young lady for whose strict honesty I would not care to be a heavy surety. There is something about those watchful blue-grey eyes of hers, and the thin lips she has a habit of plucking at with her slim fingers;—she might, by the way, be more attentive to her nails, seeing the idle life she leads since she left off playing frog—that has often set me thinking. Is it Miss Mite who robs me? and if so, when and how? What ought I to do?

Within a week, accidentally, I find out the truth, and a day later before I have decided how to act, the whole household whose safety the Brass Knocker watches over, somewhat laxly, as it seems to me, is screaming energetically over the business.

We number among our boarders one “steady and stolidly, jolly Bank Holiday, every-day young man,” Prodders by name, a creature devoid of character (I don't mean he has got a bad one), a completely ordinary, commonplace—clean collar of a Sunday, egg-and-bacon breakfast, three chop dinner, and tea with shrimps and cresses—young man. A sort of human plug with a

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place assigned it by an over-indulgent Dame Nature, that watches o'er the hatching of midges, and makes things comfortable for jelly-fish. Prodgers is something in the City, and comes home from his toil there thoroughly well prepared for his food—in splendid form—up to help upon help. A young man with a power of expressing loudly sound opinions on things generally. A young man with a sense of right and wrong upon him, and a quite deafening mode of setting people straight. A very young, young man!

* * * * *

For the last night or two it has been my pleasure to sleep with my bedroom door locked, hitherto not my custom, but I have slept lightly. Between one and two this particular morning I am thoroughly aroused by a loud angry voice, and a voice that in hoarse whispers begs for mercy. I know both—one is Prodgers's, the other belongs to the party by the name of Ffinch. Five minutes ago I had been awakened by a faint noise at my room door, as of some one turning the handle and pushing at it and letting go the clasp. Then I heard a stealthy step, and the turning of another door-handle. Catching up my lamp when the sound of the voices reaches my ear, I rush to the door. It is as I thought. The younger man has caught the old one, holds him in an iron grip, and is shouting loudly.

"Hush! hush! for Heaven's sake, no scandal!" I gasp.

"Yes, yes," the old man pleads, shaking violently as one palsy-stricken. "I—I—will give it all back, but—but—don't show me up. I—I—shall die of shame."

"You should have thought of that before!" shouts Nemesis. "What has that got to do with me? I have a DUTY to perform!"

The scene is horrible to look upon—the poor shivering thing, his white hair flying wildly, his eyes rolling in frenzied terror; the other, with his giant strength, and inward sense of virtue making him stronger, still mercilessly cruel.

"Pray, pray, hold your tongue!" I cry. "Let us talk it over."

But it is now all too late. The house is aroused, the scandal out, and nothing but shame can follow. There is talk of a policeman being sent for, but happily the idea is not acted on; and presently, after much bitter talk, some tears too on the old man's part, and silent glowering rage on that of the niece's, it is agreed that a council of war shall be held, and the "Night Prowler's" fate decided on. It is extraordinary, when we come to hear all upon the subject, what things are wholly lost and unaccounted for. The ladies, in particular, have lost warehouses full. Jewellery (found presently), clothing (turning up a week or two afterwards), heavy pieces of furniture even, and old empty trunks; and Mrs. Topperton has lost a broken foot-warmer. But we are, at last, all agreed that an example should be made, and call upon the criminals to come forth from the room they are locked in.

There is no answer. There are no criminals. A few rags and tatters left,

THE GENTLEMAN IN SEEDY BLACK.

but the uncle and niece have crawled stealthily from the house. We persuade Prodgers, whose loss, after much calculation, amounts to sixpence (two shillings taken, eighteenpence recovered—missing sixpence found some days afterwards), to hold his noise, and no more is done.

“Kleptomania,” says Mrs. Topperton; “that’s what they call it.”

“And so highly respectable as I thought them,” says Mrs. Mite. “And such references! *And he has money, too; that I’m sure of. Lots, in the funds!*”

CHAPTER XXII.

THE GENTLEMAN IN SEEDY BLACK.

WE all wonder what he is. Of course, according to the perfidious Mite, he is a perfect gentleman. *Ça va sans dire*. He pays well, too, if we may believe Mite’s testimony, though, by the way, whilst a boarder yet tarries behind the shadow of the Brass Knocker it is not Mite’s custom to make public any little monetary shortcomings that may exist—perhaps it would be bad policy to do so. So each of us when we get behind a day or two fancies himself the only defaulter, and feels sneaky and sly and shy.

But there is no reason to suppose that this gentleman is shorter of money than the rest of us, although the black suit he wears is somewhat threadbare and rusty. What is he? that’s the question. He has several very odd ways with him, we have noticed. After dinner the male members of Mite’s menagerie frequently tarry in the dining-room and indulge in a pipe or cigar, and at such times, although he does not smoke himself nor contribute materially to the general conversation, our man in black is always present; and this is where one of his odd ways is apparent. When the smoking has gone on for some little time, he invariably stretches forth his hand towards the tray holding the cigar-ashes, and possessing himself of a big pinch, draws towards him an empty tumbler—the tallest he can find—and muttering something to himself, which would appear to be of the nature of an incantation, he crumbles the dust slowly into it. This ceremony he will repeat perhaps half a dozen times, unmindful of observant spectators, who nudge one another and stare with all their eyes.

In a block of buildings at the back of Ghou Square is a large manufactory of some kind where many hands are employed, and to this is attached a certain dismal ding-donging bell that some one pulls every day at the commencement and the end of the “dinner hour” with such deliberation one might almost imagine it were for a funeral. Indeed, upon more than one occasion our seedy-black gentleman would appear to have been possessed with that idea, and, rising suddenly, has moved towards the door

with slow and solemn steps ; and once being in the passage, in the act of taking his hat down from its peg, when the sound smote upon his ear, he replaced that article of wearing apparel and went bareheaded forth into the square, his fingers plucking at his sleeves.

Our Nondescript, who was a witness of this strange proceeding, was greatly astonished, and he, reporting what had occurred to a wondering auditory, much wild conjecture ensued, and finally it was agreed that the new boarder was "off his nut"—was mad.

But in this his judges were wrong. The time is not far off when the thing shall be. *But he is not quite mad yet.*

Her Majesty, the Topperton, has a fancy for strolling in churchyards. She has neither kith nor kin buried in or near to London, but it is a mania of hers to select a suburban cemetery for a promenade, and there to attend at the funerals of strangers, shedding tears over graves of the inmates of which she has no kind of knowledge. As one day she imparts some of her recent experience to the company at the dinner-table, our man in black is seen to rouse himself with a start from a reverie and glance eagerly round.

"An odd taste," he says, "an odd taste ! Had I my way, I would never set foot in a churchyard again—never enter one till I was carried there, and another fellow read the service. No, no !" and he shudders and shakes his head, and falls into another reverie.

There is something so odd in the way he says this—something so wild about his eyes and his manner generally, that we all stare at him, and then at each others' faces, uneasily. The lady boarder sitting next to him sidles away a little bit, and an awkward silence ensues.

"Well," says Mrs. Topperton, with hesitation, "perhaps so, sir. Certainly—you're quite right, I daresay. It has an effect on the spirits."

"Spirits !" he cries, looking up. "Yes, that's the end of most of them ; it drives them to it. What else can they do, to get away from themselves for awhile—to get the thing out of their minds ? Thirty to forty a day—it's enough to turn the strongest brain—it's destruction—death !"

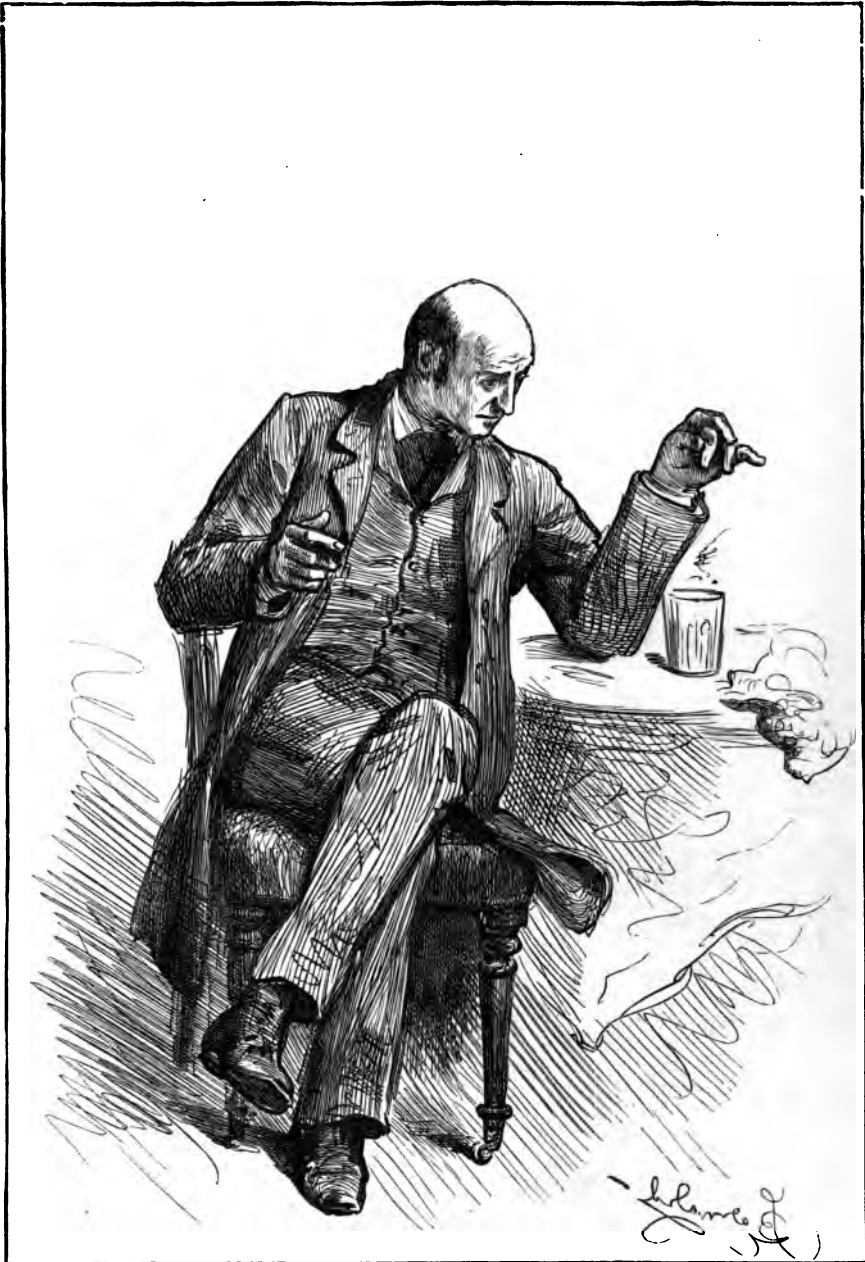
The lady boarder next to him sidles more—nay, rises, and hastily leaves the table. We all feel very uncomfortable, and our funny boarder turns quite white.

There can be no mistake about our friend : he is going wrong, and that night, after he has taken up his bed-room candlestick and departed, Mrs. Mite is summoned by a select committee who want to know.

"It isn't safe to sit at table with him," says the lady boarder he has frightened so.

"No," says our funny boarder ; "even Mrs. Mite's knives *might* cut—in the hands of a very strong and desperate man."

Mrs. Mite, hemmed up in a corner, at length offers some particulars respecting him. He is in the Church, although the neckties he wears when



"ASHES TO ASHES."

THE REVEREND SKILITES.

off duty are scarcely clerical—nor, indeed, is the cut of his waistcoat collar.

“He keeps his things there,” says Mrs. Mite.

“Where?” we ask.

“In the mortuary, at the cemetery; you know, where he goes to do the burying.”

The truth is out at last—our man of mystery is a cemetery chaplain. We somehow none of us feel quite well when we hear it. No sermons has he to preach, no marriage ceremonies to perform, no christenings or churchings; *his business it is to go on burying for ever and ever and ever,—till he dies.*

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE REVEREND SKILITES.

“ONE of the nicest men you ever came across, my dear,” says little Mite; “a clergyman and—a perfect gentleman.”

He somehow comes on us as rather a big surprise, this last importation of Mrs. Mite’s—this newly-caught natural curiosity added to our show. We have been just a little bit shaken over our last reverend—the cemetery chaplain. We had not been prepared for him. We are getting used to him in a kind of way, but we shall all feel awfully pleased when he goes; and the new one we don’t know what to think of.

I fear that the members of this happy family have not been lucky in their experiences of life, and have, individually and collectively, rather overdosed themselves with the seamy side, and occupied themselves somewhat unnecessarily with the contemplation of grim realities that did not absolutely concern them. We are, then, all quite familiar with shady clericals, the black sheep, drunken and debauched, who bring disgrace upon their holy office, but we were not quite prepared for a clerical kitten.

Mr. Skilites is the impersonation of playfulness. He is thirty years of age, perhaps, but, save that his hair is of the scantiest, he is quite boyish in aspect, and skips and frisks. At games of all kinds he invariably makes one; all sports and pastimes are familiar to him, and he dances as nimbly as the man on the stage who supports substantial loveliness when it twirls on one leg at an overbalancing angle. Forfeits he is positively immense in, and once after dinner, to the perfect consternation of Mrs. Topperton, he proposes Hunt the Slipper.

You may have noticed there are some people in the world who never can “sit straight” on their chairs, and our Reverend Skilites is one of them.

“And where,” says Mrs. Topperton, “the man’s legs will be next, is more than I should care to answer for.”

BEHIND A BRASS KNOCKER.

He is, in point of fact, the Fred Vokes or Majilton of our establishment, and occasionally will, for a small wager, kick threepenny-bits from surprising altitudes. It may not be quite the class of exercise one would look for in even the most muscular of Christians, but he does it wonderfully well.

As to his clerical duties, he is at present, he tells us, unattached, but shortly expects to be appointed to a good living in the gift of a titled relative. Meanwhile, he eats and drinks at Mrs. Mite's table, and makes merry.

The only thing at all unkittenish about him is the particular branch of art to which he devotes his leisure moments, and this is the only subject on which he is even momentarily serious. Sometimes he will sit in a bird-like attitude perched upon a chair, nursing his knees, and evidently deep in thought, his eyes fixed on vacancy. Then suddenly he will spring to the ground, produce a scrap of paper, and—*sketch a man hanging by his neck.*

No other subject does he ever draw, though there is observable considerable variety in the construction of the instrument of death to which the man is attached. In his bed-room we learn are scores, hundreds—thousands even of these strange studies, and, interrogated upon the subject, our Reverend says that he has recently officiated as a gaol chaplain, has seen several executions, and is bent, if possible, upon making an improvement in the *modus operandi*.

"He'll be experimentalizing on himself some of these fine days," says Mrs. Topperton, "see if he don't."

He does, too. One day he does not come downstairs, and after knocking a long while some one pushes open the door, which creaks loudly owing to the dead weight attached to it.

He has chosen an ordinary hat-peg, and has effected his purpose in a most bungling and painful manner.

He must have suffered dreadfully.

He is awfully ugly to look at.

CHAPTER XXIV.

DEADLY NIGHTSHADE.

"WE must all die," says Deadly Nightshade. And little Mrs. Mite, raising her eyes and hands, is heard to murmur, as though with a sense of deep conviction, "That's true!"

Of course his name isn't "Deadly"—that is a nickname only, applied to him by our funny gentleman, who is very happy at this kind of thing. He is Doctor Nightshade (or Nightlight—again our funny gentleman).

"One of the nicest gentlemen I ever met in my life," says Mrs. Mite, reporting the result of the first interview; "and his wife an invalid, but does



HARD AT IT.

DEADLY NIGHTSHADE.

not give the least bit of trouble, for he waits on her himself. What a sad thing, is it not? And the very best of references; everything most satisfactory."

Next day the invalid is installed upstairs in a room that has a side window, with what Mrs. Mite describes as "a cheerful look-out," and the doctor takes his seat at the general table.

We all agree that he is a most pleasant man, so well-informed, so affable! "Quite an addition," says Mrs. Topperton, "to our little party." He is a man of fifty, I should think, and his hair—of which there is not a great deal—is very smoothly brushed, and his upper lip and chin and the lower part of his jaws very cleanly shaven. Round his neck he has a white handkerchief, that looks like an old-fashioned stock; and he wears a suit of black, which is very new and shiny. He has a peculiarly soft and soothing way with him, and a noiseless tread. Thus it often startles those who are nervously inclined, to find him of a sudden by their side, or saying something in honied tones over their shoulders. He is, the first night, up in the drawing-room, here, there, and everywhere, and has chatted with every one in the room very adroitly and unobtrusively, and picks up a vast amount of information with respect to who and what we all are. As to medical advice, we see quite plainly that in future we shall get that gratis, and with a sweet smile, in which he shows a double row of long white teeth all in excellent preservation, he informs us that he has for some time past given up practice, except for amusement; and then, with a sad expression overshadowing his face, he adds, "One who is near and very dear to me occupies all my time. And yet, after all, how little skill avails! We must all die!"

"That's true!" says Mrs. Mite.

Mrs. Mite has already made inquiries as to the invalid upstairs, who, if she is to go on as she has begun, will indeed give little enough trouble. None at all, in fact, for she never rings the bell, and never takes any meals that he himself does not prepare for her, and he alone sees to her wants. "What devotion!" say the lady boarders. "Ah, if all husbands were like that!" The gentlemen boarders don't say much, but there is an impression about that "that doctor, poor devil!" has a hardish time of it, and we all agree that when death does his work it will be "a happy release."

Now, as may be imagined, Mrs. Mite is not desirous of having people come and die in her place; but when Doctor Nightshade first brings his invalided wife within the shadow of the Brass Knocker, there is no question of her dying there. The visit, indeed, is to be but a short one. The doctor has brought her from the north—from home, where the air was too strong for her. He himself carried her into the house and upstairs, veiled. Her face was never seen. The least breath of air might bring on that dreadful cough. He is taking her now to Devonshire, for the change, he feels certain, will be beneficial; and he speaks hopefully when he says this, and his eyes sparkle, and his colour heightens. How fond he is of her!

BEHIND A BRASS KNOCKER.

But somehow the business that the doctor has to see to in town before they can get away lasts longer than he thought for at first, and the invalid does not improve.

"You give her enough nourishing things, doctor?" asks Mrs. Topperton.

"My dear madam," he answers, in a tone of gentle remonstrance, laying, as he speaks, his soft hand on her arm, "what is there my darling could desire that I would deny her?"

One day Mrs. Topperton receives from one of her tenants some fine bunches of grapes, and insists that the best bunch shall be taken up to the invalid, an arrangement which the doctor smilingly acquiesces in. The tidying of the invalid's room is the doctor's special care; no one else ever enters it; but his own bed-room, which adjoins it, with a door of communication between, is tidied in the ordinary fashion by the housemaid, with the casual assistance of Miss Mite. And this young lady, for reasons of her own, prying into the rubbish in the fireplace, finds the grape-stones and skins and stalks among some crumpled scraps of paper. There's nothing in it, no doubt, and yet it is odd that they did not come out of the invalid's room on some dirty plate, unless the doctor ate the grapes himself.

The doctor himself cooks little things upstairs by the aid of a tiny stove that, as he says, makes no smell or mess whatever; yet in a more particular household, less pervaded by strange odours, I fancy that evidences of the doctor's culinary art might be detected.

"There is a chronic twang of red herring about my landing since the doctor has come," says our funny gentleman. "It's a queer sort of diet for an invalid."

But she is not fed entirely upon red herrings, that is sure, for one day a broken saucepan is put outside the invalid's door, containing some stew which has a savoury smell. Tempted thereby, Miss Mite tastes it, and the tears fill her eyes, and she gasps for breath.

"Oh, merciful powers!" she cries; "the pepper! the pepper! I've nearly burnt my tongue out!"

Red herrings and red-hot stew *are* odd things to feed an invalid upon.

The doctor has talents as a reader of a high order, and the ladies are never tired of listening to him. He has even himself written some charming verses relating to the Home Virtues, full of tenderness and noble thoughts; and these, after great persuasion, he reads aloud. There are, when the sound of his voice ceases, more than one pair of eyes in the room dimmed by tears.

The doors leading into the invalid's room are ordinarily kept locked—Miss Mite has tried them many a time, and once, when she knew the doctor was out, tapped and called to ask if anything were wanted, but there was no reply. This evening when the Hymns of Home were being recited down below, Miss Mite once again tries the bed-room door, finds it open, and enters. All is dark within, but in her hand she carries a candle, the



"HYMNS OF HOME."

OUR GENTLEMANLIKE YOUNG MAN.

light from which falls upon a sight that makes her flesh creep. Amongst indescribably sordid surroundings, upon a horribly dirty bed, something unwashed, unkempt, with but a faint resemblance to a woman, painfully lurches itself into a sitting posture, and in a hoarse whisper begs for water for the love of God. A glass stands upon a table within reach three parts full of brandy. There is no water in the room, but in the cupboard half a score of empty brandy-bottles, and there is raw gin in the water-jug.

When he is tried, the jury bring in a verdict of wilful murder; but the Press take the matter up, and medical experts are called in, and presently he goes scot-free. *He is living now and is highly respected, only he does not call himself by the same name.*

CHAPTER XXV.

OUR GENTLEMANLIKE YOUNG MAN.

“**H**E’S most gentlemanlike!” exclaims poor little Mrs. Mite, clasping her mittened hands together. This is the first we hear of him after the interview downstairs, wherein the terms have been discussed, and the home comforts expatiated upon.

“What is it to be a gentleman?” asked Thackeray in one of his slashing articles on poor much-abused George the Fourth. And I ask, “What is it to be *gentlemanlike*?” Well, here he is before us. Let us see in what his likeness to a gentleman consists. He is fashionably attired. His collars and cuffs are spotless. His hair always looks freshly mown. The trimming of his nails must occupy a deal of his time. His boots are never muddy. His hat shines like a polished mirror. He carries a knob-stick. He wears gloves. He speaks slowly, in a low soft voice, and rarely smiles. He is a perfect man of business, and punctuality itself. His arithmetical powers are extraordinary. He can spell like a dictionary, writes an excellent hand, and has a splendid memory. At his office he is a model clerk, and his juniors fear and hate him. Sometimes in the morning he looks rather pale, but his hand never shakes. His head may ache, but he works as well. He has no vices that are known, and—no virtues either. He never swears, nor uses coarse language, nor goes to church. He is an atheist, and a believer in nothing that is good, or pure, generous, open, or honest. He has as little heart as a spring lettuce, and is as rotten at the core as an overgrown radish. He has never said or done one kind thing in all his life. He is wholly colourless, washed-out, worthless. What is he here for? Was Providence asleep when he was born? Why are there such as he with well-filled pockets, with good clothes on their backs, with the lives of other men a million times better at their mercy? There must be something wrong somewhere.

BEHIND A BRASS KNOCKER.

"He's most gentlemanlike," says Mrs. Mite. And the lady members of our happy family all agree with her.

What breath has been wasted, what time, big capital letters and italics, during the last few hundred years, in settling the question, "What's a gentleman?" Turn to your dictionary, and you will find that a gentleman is every man above the rank of a yeoman; in a more limited sense, he who, without a title, bears a coat of arms; loosely, every man whose occupation or income raises him above menial services or an ordinary trade. Bless me! But have you never known a tailor who was a perfect gentleman? I have. And actors and artists, and authors even. What does it matter to me where you draw the line that leaves the cad on one side, and keeps the gentleman on t' other? We are most of us, some time or other, at any rate in our own estimation, perfect gentlemen, and what right have any of you to rob us of the small crumbs of comfort we pick up thus thinking, for all your money and land, and the nonsensical birds, beasts, and fishes emblazoned upon your carriage panels? But I protest against our gentleman-like young man.

"He's most gentlemanlike," says Mrs. Mite. And so he is, and monkey-like too. Surely there are some drops of the baboon's blood in his composition, the ape's cunning and cruelty. I can see it in his thin-lipped, deadly face.

But how came it here, this caricature of humanity, this glibly sure, mechanically correct mannikin? Had it no father, had it no mother, to love it weakly and fool over it in tearful tenderness as, God bless them, mothers have over us? Had it never a father to pat its head and buy toys for it? Did it ever play with toys at all? Had it ever a mother, at whose knee it learnt to lisp prayers? Did it ever say prayers? See it now at Mrs. Mite's dinner-table! Did you ever see brighter, sounder teeth, or jaws in finer working order? Gentlemanlike by all means. See how the spoon is held during soup! How dexterously the fish is forked up! How discreetly the napkin is used, &c., &c. There is no unseemly hurry or too apparent selfishness as is to be found in others present, but be sure it has all it wants.

In money matters it is scrupulously exact. It tots up and totals the week's washing-bill, and corrects it, when there is occasion, in red ink. But it has its generous moments where only itself is concerned. It now and then treats itself to a nice little dinner out of doors, deducting its share at Mite's dinner-table, of course; and after it has dined well, and called for its coffee and toothpick, saunters into a stall at its favourite theatre, and there, nursing its stick with its legs crossed, its silk sock and low-cut shoe properly displayed, forms one of a row of colourless young men all horribly alike, upon whom Cuddlie Slyboots and Kissie Brazen bestow their sweetest smiles and lavish their charms and graces. And the Cuddlies and



THE GENTLEMANLIKE YOUNG MAN.

THE WRECK OF A COUNTESS.

Kissies and their sisterhood sometimes love such things as these, and make sacrifices for them.

But the mother and father of our gentlemanlike young man, I was forgetting them.

"Here's a nuisance," he says one day to his head clerk; "just when we've a rush of work on. Look at this—" And he passes over a letter, telling him that his father is dying, and begging him to hasten down into the country whilst there is yet time.

"Dear me! dear me!" says the elder man. "You must go, of course, at once." "I suppose so," says our young man; "it wouldn't be quite the thing not to. But I'll just finish up what I'm about. There's a train in the evening." "And after all, would you believe it?—a false alarm," he says, a week hence.

But what brings this model young gentleman to this museum of curiosities? Is it for the sake of economy? or is it possible that the pretty face of our Hussy has anything to do with it?

One evening they pass me riding together in a hansom. She reaches home first, calm and deliberate. She has been to see her aunt at Notting Hill and missed the train.

That same night Captain Brown buttonholes me. "I'll tell you something that will rather surprise you," he says. "Our young friend Robinson there's right name isn't Robinson. It was quite by a fluke I came across him last night at the Vultures. *That's the Honourable Tate Mutton, Lora Deddered's son.* He's as rich as Cræsus, sir; but the old man's in queer street. It's a rum start, isn't it?" "Very," I reply.

I happen to know something of his mother and father too. I'll tell you a little of the story.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE WRECK OF A COUNTESS.

I NEVER remember anything more horrible.

Leaving the glorious sunlight of a summer's day behind me, with its accompanying song of birds and sweet perfume of new-mown hay in the fields around, and the flowery hedges of the Fulham lane, in which, a while ago, I had been loitering with a sense of contentment and rest, I passed into the shadow of an overhanging doorway and rang a jangling bell.

"I thought you was the milk," the woman said who answered my summons—a fat, fair woman, with a red blotched face, and a good-natured, rather silly smile. Her sleeves were tucked up to her elbows, her shoes trodden down at heel—a milk-can dangled on the fat little finger of her left

BEHIND A BRASS KNOCKER.

hand. "Well, there," she repeated, "I did think you was the milk, and I was a-wondering why you was so early. But the clock have stopped. We'd no idea what time it was."

In truth, time had got sadly mixed and muddled in this forgotten corner, where the Countess was frittering away what there was left to her of a wasted life. The day—beginning in an uncertain manner when anybody rang or knocked—ran its fitful course, half slept out, half yawned through, with occasional lucid intervals, in which meals were got ready in a higgledy-piggledy fashion, not too cleanly; and then twilight crept upon and surprised the household, and night following rapidly, it was found that some one, the day before, had forgotten to buy matches, or had dropped what there were into the washhand-basin. But the moonlight or firelight answers the purpose, and from the gloomy corners come hysterical sobbings, incoherent prayers, and again and again ever recurring the clink of the gin-bottle upon the dram-glass's edge.

The hibernating tortoise the scullery-maid cracks knobbly bits of coal with, is in some sort a living creature. The Countess somehow exists, and has glimmerings of reason from time to time, and a soul, let us say, to be saved or damned.

"What did you please to want, sir?" the woman asked, still dangling the milk-can.

"Is her ladyship at home?" I inquired.

A burst of shrill laughter drowned the answer, if any were made. I looked past the woman, down the dimly-lighted passage running through the house into a garden beyond, where the sunshine lighted up a mass of bright green foliage, and flickered on the grey stonework of a quaint old fountain, and the various tints of red and brown in a high brick wall closing the garden in. At the foot of the fountain was an oddly-shaped stone trough, and round this, pushing and squeezing—as it first seemed to me, playing a game of romps—two young women of about the age of twenty, and a nondescript gawky lad of eighteen or thereabouts, looking something like an assistant potman, tavern messenger, or "chucker-out." The two young women were rosy-cheeked, strong, full of health—low-class servants. Staring harder at the group, I saw that they were ducking or washing somebody or something that struggled and spluttered, and I could just make out some shabby black rags, mud-stained, upon the edge of the trough.

"Ha, ha!" said the woman with the milk-can, laughing shamefacedly, "it's their larks: young folks will be young folks, won't they? What do you please to want?"

"Is Lady Deddered at home?" I asked.

The woman's eyes twinkled. "It's about the money, isn't it?"

Before I could reply, there came another shrill burst of merriment, which had a spiteful ring in it, from the garden at the back. Then a broken voice,

THE WRECK OF A COUNTESS.

weak and breathless, cried, "Don't! don't! That's enough! Oh! please don't!" But an instant later shriller laughter still, drowned the sound.

"She *is* in," the woman with the milk-can continued, "but I hardly think you can see her just now. She—she's engaged."

"I must see her, if you please," said I. "I will wait."

The woman put the milk-can down. "Will you walk in, sir?" she said; and, as she spoke, opened the door of a sitting-room which ran the length of the house from front to back. I walked towards the back, towards an open French window looking out into the garden.

Meanwhile the laughter without ceased. The face of the nondescript hobbledehoy wore a half scared expression. One of the young women did not seem to understand, and was still grinning; when she did at last understand, she tossed her head and made a face. The other looked frightened.

The soiled black rags were not visible from the spot where I stood.

I could hear the woman I had been speaking to say some words I could not distinctly catch in an angry undertone to the others, and then I saw something totter forward, which caught and clung to the arm of the person I had spoken with. It was a human creature—a woman—the upper part of whose clothes were drenched through and streaming with water. Her face wore a dazed besotted look, a vacant meaningless grin played upon a weak thick-lipped mouth.

I staggered at the sight.

Her grey hair, still bleared with soap, hung dishevelled upon her shoulders; and, as she approached, she was making uncertain, unmeaning movements, with a trembling hand, to gather it up into some kind of order. It was still in the same state when she stumbled through the French window, stared at me vacantly, and dropped into a chair.

The light in the room was very dim, but I could make out something of her shabby dress, torn under one arm, and hooked together in a way so that I got a glimpse of the dirty frilling of some linen garment. Still she muddled with the lank tresses of her hair.

"There!" she said; "what matters?" and laughed foolishly.

Then seeming to recollect herself, she motioned me, with something of a long-put-aside and almost forgotten dignity, to be seated. The servant left us.

The Countess—this was she—must some time, not many years ago too, have been a beautiful woman. Even now, in the frightful disorder in which I found her, there were some traces of beauty left—some wreckage saved from the old times when she was of society and the world. She seemed to be making a great effort to collect her thoughts, then fixed her eyes upon me with an expression in which there was something of shame and dread.

"I have brought you a cheque, madam, from Lord Deddered, for seventy-five pounds. May I trouble you for a receipt?"

BEHIND A BRASS KNOCKER.

"A receipt? Oh, yes! I have it here somewhere. It has been written a long while. Where did I put it? To be sure! to be sure! This is it."

From some pocket among the black rags she drew forth a soiled and crumpled scrap of paper, to which a receipt stamp had been affixed. Flattening the paper out laboriously, she turned her head slowly round, seeking for a pen and the ink-bottle, which lay straight in front of her—a penny earthenware bottle. Having at last discovered it, she looked towards me again.

"This is the—the——"

"The 30th," I said.

She wrote down the figures, "The 30th of—of——"

"Of June," I said.

"Of June, 18—18——"

"1879."

"1879?" she repeated doubtfully; "I thought it was 1880, or 1877. There! What's it matter? How time passes!"

She seemed here to lose herself in thought, tapping the paper with her pen, her eyes fixed on vacancy.

Suddenly glancing towards the window and the room door, as though in fear of eavesdroppers, she asked eagerly, "You have come from him—from Lord Deddered. You have seen him! How is he—my Arthur?" Then, passing her hand across her eyes, "You need not say I *was*—it must seem strange to you. Those women have done me good, though I did not like it much. But there—and Arthur, eh? Poor Arthur!"

The tears were running down her cheeks. She felt among the rags for a pocket-handkerchief, but, not finding one, wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

"I—I drank too much last night," she continued; "I couldn't help it. You don't know. The police came and took John. They said he had robbed somebody. Perhaps it is true. He would do anything for me. Poor John! He loves me still. Oh, I am sure! You understand. We were quite without money. I had not a farthing. He was remanded yesterday. I could not pay for counsel; but now I can, and——may I offer you anything?"

I refused.

"You are a friend of Lord Deddered's?" she asked, after a pause.

"No; I come from his lordship's solicitors."

"Yes, yes, his solicitors—I remember—I remember! Then you do not know; I must tell you. I have no one to tell now. It is a relief." After another pause, in which her memory appeared to fail her altogether, "Look at that girl in the yard by the fountain. That is Kitty" (she pointed to the one who had made a face). "The young fellow is not her sweetheart. He is not here, but she is going to be married very soon. I hope it will be for



WHAT SHE WAS.

THE WRECK OF A COUNTESS.

the best. It was she who poured the water on me. When I am like this it does me good—the cold water. She is right. But I don't like the soap—it was their fun. How they laughed! You would, too. Poor John! he is remanded, you know. If I had only had this money yesterday, I could have employed counsel, and—I should not have got drunk.”

The woman who had let me into the house here entered the room.

“Ah, Martha! This is Martha. She is so good to me.” She took the servant's hand in both hers. “See here—the money. We will go together to the police court. We shall get John out on bail, shan't we? Yes—eh? Here are seventy-five pounds.”

The other woman seemed to look down on her in pity. The poor Countess leant her hand upon the table and sobbed. The penny ink-bottle was upset.

“See there what you have done!” said Martha, but in a gentle tone, and mopped the ink up with a rag of some kind, lying on the notes of an open piano.

Suddenly the Countess roused herself again, and caught me by the hand, which she squeezed tightly, in a feverish grasp. Her broken voice was scarcely audible. A wisp of her wet grey hair tossing about, straggled across her face. She looked like one in a dream.

“My husband turned me out,” she said. “He was right. Some, in his place, would have killed me. He is good; he sends me money. It was not my fault. His coachman—I was in love with him—with John. I could not resist it. I did try; it was like a fatality. Poor John! I could not give him up. I said so—but I loved Arthur—both—you men cannot understand. Arthur sent me away, it was only right. There was no divorce—no scandal. I agreed to it all. They do not know where I am, Arthur's friends don't. Perhaps they think I am dead. I wish I was.”

The water, trickling from her hair, mingled with the miserable woman's tears. But she roused herself, releasing my hand.

“The time is going while I am chatting here. We must get dressed, Martha. We will see the magistrate. I have the money at last. By the way, sir, my child, my son—”

Kitty entered the room.

“Here's Jim's got to go now,” she cried in a loud voice. “He says, don't you want anything fetched from the corner? The money's come, hasn't it?” And she patted the lady sharply upon the shoulder.

“Yes, yes. But there is something still in that bottle. Pass it me, dear; this gentleman, perhaps——”

They took a bottle and glasses off the piano, and placed them on the table. I caught up my hat and fled.

* * * * *

Outside, in the lane, the sun was still shining. The sweet smell of new-

BEHIND A BRASS KNOCKER.

mown hay was wafted towards me by soft, warm zephyrs. The birds were singing in the trees. The sky above was clear blue. A boy, a few yards from the garden gate, was trying to drive a pig.

"It's something sickening, havin' to deal with a obstinate beast like him," said the boy.

"Why?" I asked.

"Why! why, here I've been at it over half an hour. It don't matter which end o' this 'ere blessed lane he goes out on, but neither on 'em 'll suit 'im, an' he's kep' me a-follerin' on 'im backards an' for'ards over half a hour, I tell ye."

As he spoke, the pig, who had been grunting and sniffing at something in the hedge, all at once set off at a brisk pace, the boy and I following. But within ten yards of the end of the lane the pig wheeled round and trotted past us. When presently I turned the corner into the high road, the boy was far behind me still down the lane, swearing at the pig.

* * * * *

But what has the pig got to do with this story?

Nothing.

And what has the Countess got to do with Mrs. Mite's boarding-house?

Nothing except that the boarder treated of in the last chapter, our gentleman-like young man, is her son, and presently perhaps we may again meet with his father—the fur-collar-coated nobleman, Lord Deddred.

CHAPTER XXVII.

OUR FINE WOMAN.

"BEDAD, sir!" says one old gentleman, smiting what thigh was left to him. "Bedad, sir!"

* * * * *

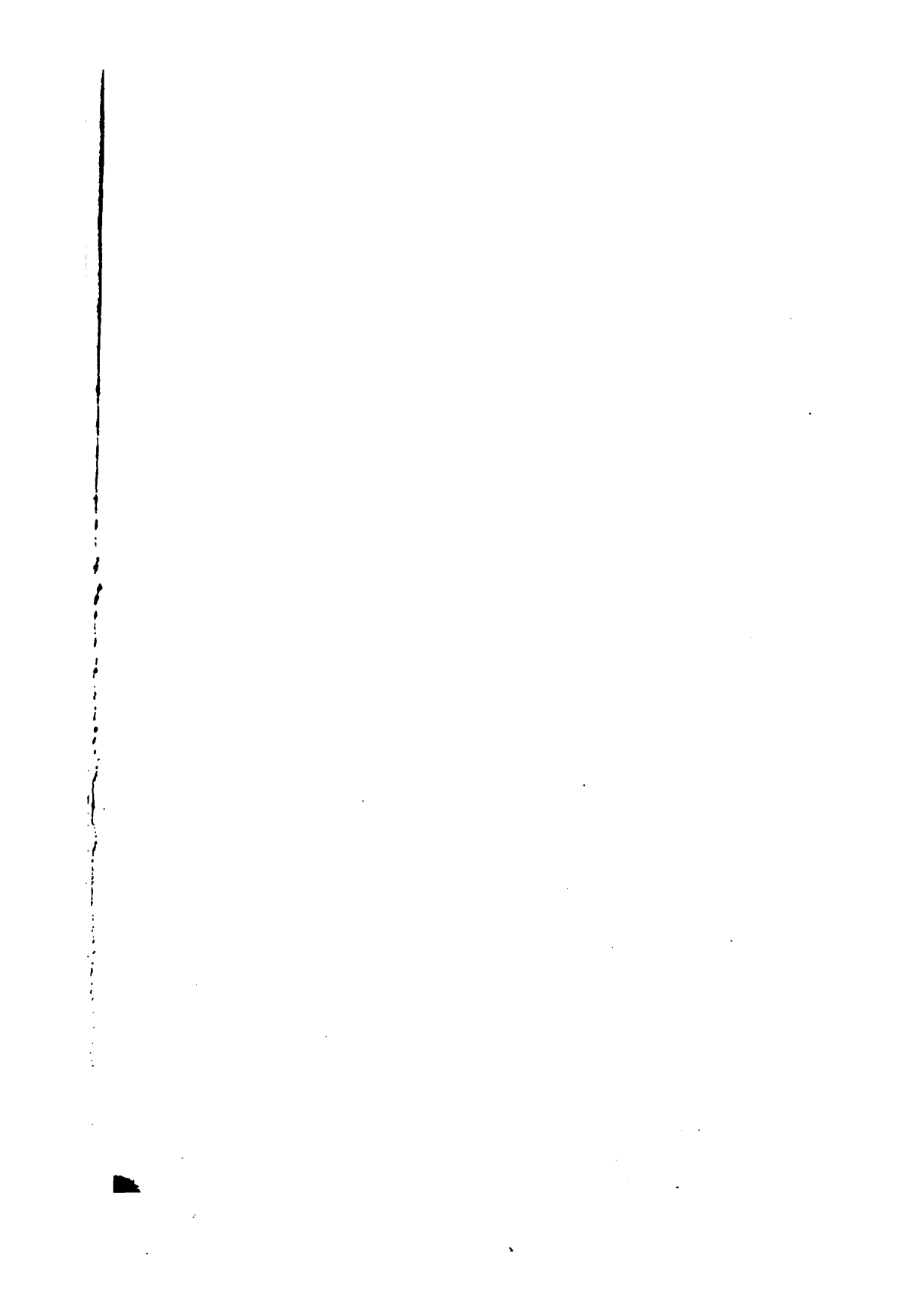
I have been compelled to put the stars you find above, because that is all the old gentleman says, and naturally, opening up like that, one would be led to suppose a lot is coming.

He is a wicked old gentleman, this of ours—that is to say, retrospectively wicked, if you can understand. He is not now a formidable old gentleman to look at. His eyes are not quite altogether what they were when William the Fourth was on the throne, nor are his teeth the same set he wore in the year of the first Great Exhibition. He has to be a very careful old gentleman indeed in these degenerate days, and live by rule, asking himself at each meal if this or that will be likely to disagree with him.

But in his day—in his day, my good, young sir—he has been a breaker of hearts, and wrencher-off of knockers and bell-pulls to make a note of. When the Marquis was out and about (in forty-one or two), he was out and



THE NEW WIDOW.



OUR FINE WOMAN.

about likewise, and was numbered high among the "out-and-outers"—if we may take his word for it. What days those were, and what a dawg was he! The Finish? I believe you. The Sluicery? I should think so. Jessop's? Rather. The Pic.? Most likely. The Judge and Jury, the Coal-Hole, the Cider Cellars, Evans's, the Duke's, Scott's, Barnes's, Quin's, the Adelaide, Mott's—Cauldwell's even? Was he all there—here, there, and everywhere? Well, from what he says, I don't mind telling you, he was very much so indeed. How he has chuckled as he ran through his little anecdotes of those wild days when Lola danced, when Heald came into his money, when Jullien led, when Carlotta bounded, before the Viscount dyed his whiskers, when the Duke wore a blue coat and white trousers, and paid morning calls in Brompton Square! Do the ghosts of dead and gone waiters, open-handed attendants, cringing go-betweens, keepers of back stairs—trucklers base, and shabby, and despicable—ever long to revisit the haunts where the money flowed, and the wine was spilt, and the foolish hours laughed away? If they do, and come, can you imagine them shivering in bleak open spaces, looking for what the Board of Works has cleared away, their fleshless fingers clutching the air where badly-gotten gold and silver ought to be? Poor luckless ghosts! there are no naughty places now-a-days, nor naughty folks to fill them. We are all good, God bless us!

"Bedad, sir!" says the old gentleman.

This exclamation bursts from him when first he sets his eyes on our Fine Woman, and I, for one, am not surprised at it. As an old gentleman of terrible experience, I think I should rather like to hear what he thinks.

Our Fine Woman is a delightful surprise to us. We were just about then, somehow or other, getting to be a little mouldy. The two nice girls who stayed here a month are now gone. The other widow has left. Things were dull; we wanted a widow badly, and now, thank goodness! she has come.

Mr. Weller, senior, bade his son beware of widows, and he was right. The last widow we had here was dangerous, but nothing to this one. Before this widow has been in the house a week all our gentlemen are madly in love with her. Poor little Mite smiles a pinched-up smile as she looks on. It is not bad for business. It keeps the gentlemen together and at home of an evening indulging in extras. Since the new widow has been here there has even been less eaten at dinner—the drink does not come out of Mite's pocket.

Yes, we are, I own, in a maudlin condition as regards the new widow. She is a "monstrous fine woman," she is a showy woman, a stylish woman, a woman of sense, a woman of the world, possibly a woman of big experiences, a superior woman,—not exactly a pretty woman, perhaps, but what may be called a man's woman. The female division sniff derisively. They have a thousand faults to find with her. She is all art, all artificiality, and as for the paint and the powder! Ugh!

BEHIND A BRASS KNOCKER.

Sometimes I look from her to 'Melia, Mrs. Mite's daughter, our Hussy—how unlike and yet how alike! There is powder and paint in both cases, and *some* experience. Do they love one another? I think not; but I may have something to say about that presently.

Meanwhile, we are to a man grovelling at the pretty feet of the widow. Lord, how we are beginning to hate one another! Angry words have over and over again arisen. Anon, maybe, we shall come to blows! She has a smile for all, but which of us does she favour most? Has she a heart to lose? and if so—

* * * * *

Good gracious! Impossible! Absurd! It can't be! Yes, it is!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE FOOL OF THE FAMILY.

"WE are," as the poet hath it, "a merry family!" here behind this Brass Knocker. I think you will allow as much if you trouble to turn over the pages I have written; but my stock is wellnigh exhausted, and I can, before giving you the last of the menagerie in the next chapter, find room but for one other—Our Fool!

I have, in my time, in and out of business, chanced to be associated with many noodles. Some people lay themselves out for noodles and pick noodles up, and then it is a bad job for the noodles netted. At Cattle Show time, for instance, a good deal of this kind of thing would appear to go on, when men of poverty make the acquaintance of noodles they meet at street corners and propose cracking a bottle with them at the handiest skittle-alley. In a higher rank of life our old friends Mr. Deuceace and Captain Rook lure Mr. Pigeon to the genial club, and it comes to pass that Pigeon is much plucked. But I have never—and I own it with sorrow as I look back upon wasted opportunities—picked up a noodle in the sense which means profiting by the transaction.

To return to *our* noodle, the dolt and fool and nincompoop of our family, Mr. Jims. From the first moment this poor creature came amongst us, we, the wits of our party, marked him down as our prey. Our funny gentleman was never in better form than he was the first night this unhappy Jims took his place at the family scramble—the dinner. He was scarcely more than a boy, horribly healthy, preposterously plump, with a head like a bladder of lard—a thing on which no reasonable man would ever have dreamt of wasting words. But he forced himself—positively forced himself and his family upon us! Did we want him, or his mother, or his Uncle Samuel served up with our beef? Certainly not, and very properly from that time forth he took an extreme back row. I must say he took it humbly, as indeed



THE ONE SHE CHOSE.



THE FOOL OF THE FAMILY.

he ought to have done; but he took it, and he kept it. We made him keep it.

But now for our Fine Woman. Now for further particulars respecting this dashing widow, who has absolutely revolutionized the whole establishment.

Never before were such goings on, such rollickings, such high jinks. Instead of being the exception, it became the rule for the male boarders to dress for dinner. A new code of politeness set in, and people passed one another things without looking angry or grumbling much. We male persons were all on our best behaviour, and basked alternately in the siren's smile. Meanwhile the female element bristled and creaked in corners. The plainest made faces of an uglier pattern even than nature had already provided them with, imitating the widow's airs and graces. "I swear," cried Mrs. Topper-ton, "the woman makes me positively sick!"

Lord, how we male things chuckled! it was delightful, exquisite,—but which of us was the favoured man?

Good heavens! Impossible!

But it was the truth. All is over now, as far as we are concerned. She, this splendid woman, is absolutely engaged—mark that word—ENGAGED—to our noodle! Why, by all I hold sacred, it has gone further than that—the day has been "named!"

Now, a male man under the influence of the glaring eye of the basilisk may not be as reflective an animal as he otherwise is, but once released from his thralldom, reason resumes its sway. Is this thing to be allowed to go on? How can we prevent it? But is it right? is it even decent? It would appear that this young fool Jims is the heir to a considerable property, and possibly to a title, for that Uncle Samuel we shut him up about turns out to be a lord. Mite knew this all along. If you please, Mite knew all about him, and in her little, mean, pettifogging way has been throwing our Hussy in his way to a pretty end, forsooth. Now that he is to marry the widow, what scenes have happened! What screaming and tearing of hair even! and shrilly-pitched lamentations reaching the ears of a select gathering upon the landing outside the dining-room door! "To be made a plaything of!" cries Mrs. Mite. "I am ashamed of you! I—I did not think you were such a fool!" But 'Melia makes no audible reply, and we listeners can fancy the dark shade flitting across her white face, her thin lips and her set teeth.

* * * * *

And this widow who has married him,—for sure enough they left here together yesterday, and have been married more than twenty-four hours now! A mere adventuress, we have found *that* out, and with by no means too good a character either. His mother will never countenance her, and his mother has been written to with full particulars. We thought it our duty to do this. In due course a reply comes from that lady; we all roar when we read it. There is, it appears, a clause in his late father's will by which, if he

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marries during her lifetime without the widow's consent, he forfeits all claim to the property.

It is just now merry Christmas-time, and Mrs. Mite is buying materials for a pudding. We are inclined to be jolly, and propose keeping Christmas Eve with games and romps. We are even now gathered round the cozy fire cracking nuts, when at the Brass Knocker below there comes a thundering rat-tat.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE MAN DOWNSTAIRS.

MRS. MITE'S coals burn brightly. "Let's have a nice blaze," says Mrs. Topperton in her genial way, and cracks the biggest lump with the poker. "Put some more on," cries our funny gentleman cheerily; "Christmas comes but once a year!"

We are still cracking nuts, and the merry joke is passed around. Mrs. Mite has herself provided negus: it is weak, but warm, and the lemons have been thrown into it by no niggard hand.

"Let's be jolly!" cries little Mite, with spasmodic cheerfulness, adding another half lemon and some more hot water to the mixture as she speaks. (Poor creature, the lemons are three halfpence each, and she has few enough halfpence to throw away.) "Let's be jolly! Who knows a riddle?"

But we presently have enough of riddles, the answers to which no one can guess, and the conversation drifts back to the topic we began dinner with, and have fitfully returned to since, quite half a dozen times—the newly-married couple.

"I wonder," says some one, "what they are doing now?"

"If they're having a merry Christmas, they'd best make the most of it," says some one else; "they don't stand a chance of many, that's certain."

"What a fool to throw himself away!"

"He's perfectly penniless, if what I hear is correct."

"And chained for life to that dreadful woman."

"Oh, she'll leave him now she finds he is no catch. Persons of that class are wholly mercenary."

"A horrid woman!"

"And to think that we should have associated with her! To think that we have sat at the same table——"

RAT-TAT-A-TAT-TAT!

It is the Brass Knocker downstairs, and as we sit listening and wondering we hear the rustle of silk. In another moment our Fine Woman is once more in our midst, and our Fool, looking absurdly happy, is in the background. "Oh," she says, "you never expected me, did you, now? But we have not followed the usual custom of going to distant parts to spend



MR. MITE.



THE MAN DOWNSTAIRS.

our honeymoon. I love London, and so does Dooda here, don't you, Dooda? And we are quite happy, aren't we, Dooda?" To which questions Dooda, grinning like an image, nods his head violently. "So," she continues, "we thought we must come round to-night and see our dear old friends once more, and we hope you won't mind drinking success to us in a glass of champagne——"

"We've brought that with us—at least, I mean three dozen bottles," says our Fool in the background.

"Yes, Dooda, dear; of course," she says, and taps him lightly on the head. "And Dooda, who is a judge, says it is the proper sort. But what I was saying was this: you will, I hope, join us in this and wish us joy, for a very great and wonderful thing has come to pass in my life. I—I've had a fortune left to me!"

* * * * *

"This is our first, but must not be our last social festival, ladies and gentlemen," says Mrs. Mite, in whose eyes there is an unwonted twinkle, and whose nose is redder than is its wont. As she speaks she upsets a wine-glass, and steadies herself by resting her hand on Mrs. Topperton's shoulder, at which familiarity Mrs. Topperton looks daggers.

"Ma," says 'Melia, appearing by her mother's side with even a whiter face than usual, "you're wanted downstairs; come."

Mrs. Mite looks a little bit frightened. Things are not going too well with her. Yesterday the gas-man was very impudent, and the butcher said "Damn!" out loud in the passage. For a long while past the landlord has been saying "things cannot go on as they are."

"What is it?" she asks.

"It's *him—papa*," responds 'Melia. "*He has come back!*"

* * * * *

Day breaks over Ghoul Square, and its earliest streaks fall upon haggard faces attached to aching heads. What a night it has been! What riot! What rows! Mrs. Topperton was the first to give notice that in a week she would leave, and now we are all going. The place, in fact, is broken up, and Mrs. Mite's career in her capacity of boarding-house keeper at an end.

It is in the middle of the night that the most dreadful part of the business occurs. It begins with a struggling and shrieking downstairs, a smashing of glass, sobs, and the sound of blows. Then 'Melia is clamouring at a boarder's door, and crying, "Sir! sir! please get up! Papa is murdering mamma!"

It is, in fact, papa, who had returned from some place unknown (Holloway Jail it turns out to be), and who has smashed open a drawer and appropriated the poor little savings the miserable woman had put by to stave off the clamouring tradespeople. As we come crowding down, for the most part but lightly attired and with horribly unbecoming head-dresses,

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he is shaking himself free from the clinging rag of a woman, whose face bears the impress of his ruffian fist and is bruised and bloodstained. "What's yours is mine!" he says. Which, indeed, is law and logic too (A.D. 1881).

Odd as it may seem, the woman has always loved him, though from the first week of their wedded life she has never received aught else but ill treatment at his hands. (He was, it seems, a sort of hanger-on, second low com., assistant scene-painter, and whatnot at the T.R. she played at, and his lordship in the fur collar gave her away.) Returning now for the twentieth time, he had contrived to talk her over, and they had made friends. *In the middle of the night, whilst she slept, he got up and robbed her.*

* * * * *

The house is closed, and the rats and mice are its occupants. I wonder what they find to eat? The windows are broken. The paint is peeling off the street door. Some one has stolen the knocker.

* * * * *

'T is merry spring-time once again when I meet 'Melia—our Hussy. The sun is shining, the birds are singing; it is a beautiful spring morning; joy and gladness fill the air, and I, for one, feel particularly frivolous. "Why," I ask myself, "should any one abuse the world, and doubt whether life be worth living? Here is a workhouse; how neat and clean it looks! Yonder a graveyard; how green the grass! That's Waterloo Bridge so many women have leaped from into eternity. I declare the old Thames looks quite sparkling and pellucid!" Our 'Melia trips towards me in dainty high-heeled shoes, and as she comes along I catch a glimpse of black silk stockings, for her frock is short. Over her yellow hair she wears a baby bonnet. She is looking prettier than ever. *She mentions casually, among other things, that ma is dead. She is not in mourning.*

CHAPTER XXX.

THE PROFESSIONAL BABY.

WHEN the late lamented Mr. Fagin, trainer of youth, and general dealer in miscellaneous acquired goods, proposed sending Miss Nancy in quest of Oliver Twist, he produced from his stock a little covered basket, saying, as he did so, "Carry that in one hand; it looks more respectable, my dear."

"Give her a door-key to carry in her t' other one," observed Mr. William Sikes, who was of the party, "it looks real and genuine like." And thus equipped, we are told, "the young lady made the best of her way to the police office, whither, notwithstanding a little natural timidity, consequent

THE PROFESSIONAL BABY.

upon walking through the streets alone and unprotected, she arrived in perfect safety shortly afterwards."

* * * * *

From the foregoing it would appear, according to the judgment of the gentlemen whose utterances are quoted, that there is respectability in a little covered basket and a door-key. We will return to the door-key, perhaps, a little later on.

The Gondola Gardens, North Rotherhithe, in its decline and fall, is in the hands of an enterprising Hebrew, with a big watch-chain and an unbounded belief in himself as a purveyor for the public and a fascinator of the sex. But it is a wet season, and there are wars and rumours of wars, and trade is bad. The British public, sick of being plucked alive by the British tradesmen, are going in more and more for co-operative stores, saving sevenpence and eightpence in the shilling, and otherwise conducting themselves in a paltry and un-English fashion. There is really no spare cash in circulation, and so the Gondola Gardens are doing "bad business."

But our friend the *entrepreneur* has plenty of pluck, and tries one thing after another breathlessly—desperately, you might almost say. One of the things is a ballet troupe, in which 'Tootsie Mite (we used to call her 'Melia), who, since she first jumped into public favour as a frog (in roughly-painted canvas, bagging about her little limbs and body, awfully rough in make, with edges that scratched and bruised), has somehow learnt to dance admirably, and is one of the attractions with a novel *Pas de Battledore and Shuttlecock*. She is sixteen now.

Here I meet her again. "Ah, Miss Tootsie, and how are you getting on?"

Miss Tootsie, before she can reply to my question, has to stamp upon a beetle that has offended her by wriggling from the damp earth bordering the weedy gravel path. The beetle disposed of, she has time to speak. "Oh, all right, thanks; how are you? You're quite a stranger. Beastly thing" (she meant the beetle, as you will see); "how I hate them, don't you?"

"Eh? Yes, I dare say," I reply carelessly.

"Yesterday morning—no, last night it was—I had a lizard. A fellow brought it me—you know what they are? All greeny and cold—ugh!—with a long tail that wags." I nod. She goes on, seeming hardly to notice what she says; certainly not noticing how I take it all.

"He bought it in a market in the City, coming down here, and put it in his portemonnaie. Well, you *would* have laughed, we both forgot it for hours and hours after. Of course he had some money somewhere else. Ha, ha! All at once we remembered the lizard. He was white in the face, and his eyes so funny, as though he had been drunk. The air seemed to revive him, and he winked and gaped—so. You should have seen him. Like a soft-hearted fool I took the horrid thing up in my hand; I'd my gloves on, luckily. What do you think? He turned on me, spiteful, and

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wanted to bite ; I dropped him pretty sharp. He'd have escaped, only Dooda went for him ; he didn't get far. You can imagine the rage I was in. I dropped him flop into a glass of flat ale. They say those things can swim. What stuff ! I've no patience ! Anyways, he didn't care much for the ale ; you would have laughed at the face he made. Then he struggled to the side—oh, they're very strong !—and caught at the rim of the glass. It was just like a dog drowning ; but he slipped back again—souse ! A beast ! You can understand the fury of me, trying to bite like that. I hadn't a hairpin I could spare, but Dooda passed me a wooden spill, and I pushed my fine gentleman back into his beer again and again. Dooda gave a shilling for him. Well, he wasn't dear. The man in the market said, 'You'll find him very lively, sir.' Yes, I pushed him. Go under, you beast, go under ! There, there ; like that. You *would* have laughed. But to think of the thing fancying he could fight against me ! and at last he floated up to the top on his back, quite dead ; but it took half an hour. Vermin I call them. What are they meant for ? The man said he slept all day in the sun. Well, he won't sleep any more now in the sun."

I stand silently during this story, which fills me with horror and disgust.

"What's the matter ?" she asks, looking up at me with her babyish blue eyes. "How serious you are ! What would *you* have done ?"

"*Boxed your ears,*" I say, and turn abruptly on my heel.

* * * * *

Two years later. I am "in front" at the Frivolity. Amazing youth, in socks of the chastest design, in evening dress, wholly irreproachable, surround me and hem me in. They nurse their knob and crutch-sticks ; occasionally they suck one end ; they seem happy.

Upon the stage the brightest, lightest, frothiest of entertainments progresses a trifle slowly. When my Tootsie trips upon the stage, and says her half-line, there is a ripple of applause from behind me, and a sound like unto the flapping of bats' wings in a box hard by. I turn round to see the flapper. His lordship, erst of the fur collar, but now in evening dress. The one who, years ago, patted Mamma Mite's head paternally. Good lord ! Mamma is dead ! but a motherly lady,—aunt, Tootsie calls her, fetches Tootsie quite maternally from the theatre, for Tootsie is yet only a little girl, who wants looking after, and wears very short frocks and long black silk stockings.

* * * * *

My way from the theatre lies through Leicester Square. There, at a corner, desirous of ascertaining where is the nearest pillar-box, I make inquiry of what I take to be a very youthful short-frocked servant girl, out on an errand, with a beer-jug and a big door-key.

But she laughs in my face. Then I look into hers, confusedly ; there is rouge on it, and bismuth. *I daresay she is another Nancy sent out to look for—another Oliver Twist.*

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE GAMBOLLING LAMB.

BRING me toys, I pray you, bring me toys. The Ark of Noah tightly packed, with Jumbo upside down, and Shem jammed in between his legs, Ham and the spotted pig mixed up, and Japheth anyhow up, among birds of strange plumage, with a string-tailed cow on the top of him.

Give me my wooden soldiers, horse and foot, with a smell of paint about them, that only time and much handling can partially dispel, but which, maybe, is best sucked off at starting. Give me the musical omnibus, dear to my memory, "Bank" upon its side, and full up with one note and a half of music in its interior. Give me my shrill tin trumpet, my flat-toned drum, my jumping Jack that had a way of getting his legs awkwardly entangled; and, above all, my monkey on a stick, doomed to the everlasting performance of aimless gymnastics, wanting in dignity even from a monkey's standard, made worse, too, by a grotesquely-coloured garb, and a tail defying all laws of nature, of three-cornered shape at the end. Give me my toys, I say; I would be a boy again, and boyish, for I am in the company of rosy boys, very young and ridiculously innocent, boys beauteous and bland.

A child in years sits on my right in brown silk socks, in low pumps of the prettiest pattern, in irreproachable evening attire, with one bright brilliant stud of worth, gleaming in the centre of a spotless shirt front, with his hair accurately arranged and smooth and shining, nursing a knob-stick, assuming an attitude, with now and again an anxious side-glance at the things I wear.

Thank Heaven! there is nothing about me which is not in a way a humble reflex of his own perfection. There are the socks, possibly of an inferior brand, yet still passable by gaslight. The solitaire likewise glitters in the bosom with a glitter forcible, if false. The coat and trousers will pass muster. They are not what they have been, but they still retain a certain gloss and a shapeliness when their wearer is seated.

On my left another ladkin strikes an attitude exactly similar to the boy babe on my right. Here, too, are the socks, the solitaire, the prettily-arranged hair, the irreproachable dress suit, and the knob-stick tenderly nurtured. And he, too, from time to time casts side-glances at me, and in the end would seem sufficiently satisfied. I have passed muster. I am glad.

Early in the evening I had dined at the same club as these young gentlemen, but at another table, and surreptitiously had watched them and listened to their prattle. It was of a harmless nature. The potations indulged in were not "heady," the repast partaken of filling and inexpensive. Good boys! there as here there had been an anxious look upon them, as though

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they were on their best behaviour, and the waiter fellow were an usher—*maitre d'études*, don, proctor, I know not what. This dining at the club at eight was evidently with them a duty that had to be gone through, and must be done just exactly according to rule, in proper form, "like other fellows do, you know;" but I will take my oath these beardless creatures would much rather have dispensed with half the ceremony, and got right away to the Frivolity Theatre, for which early in the day they, at some library in Bond or Regent Streets, had taken stalls, and at which at that moment the curtain had drawn up on the screaming farce that commenced the evening's programme. The knowledge of that, I feel sure, was bitter to these good boys to bear, although, of course, no fellow would have dreamt of going to see a farce. Yet, now, supposing by some chance it wasn't such an unheard-of proceeding, and fellows had not to dine so late, and one might sometimes have a two-o'clock meal, and a six-o'clock sharp meat tea?

I say I listen to their prattle. One has read a book of Miss Braddon's, and, carried away by his recollections of it, tells his friend a portion of the plot. The other has recently seen Irving in *The Bells*, and couldn't say he cared much for horrors. One has met "Charley Smith," a fellow both knew. And then follow particulars regarding past glories of the cricket-field, when Smith bowled Robinson of Jesus's. From time to time they look up at the clock and consult their own watches.

"Shall we have coffee?" one asks the other. "No, there's hardly time. The burlesque begins at nine forty-five. By the way, did your hear that about Tootsie?"

The speaker tells the other boy *that* about Tootsie, and he colours crimson, doubles up, and explodes with laughter. The boy, his companion, who has told the story, a moment afterwards looks affrightedly towards the waiter. Perhaps he may have overheard, and will be angry!

From the mention of Tootsie's name, I guess where they are going, but I am surprised to find, when I reach the theatre, that by chance my seat divides theirs. I offer to move so that they may sit together, and this circumstance leads to the exchange of a few words of casual talk here, and at the refreshment-bar, to which my young friends wander in the interval between the end of half an act of a comedy of some kind we are in time for, and the all-important burlesque.

At the refreshment-room our boys ask mechanically for a split soda and whisky, of which they only drink a portion, and then as mechanically seek the portal of the theatre, there to smoke a cigarette. Here other boys, bronzed and rosy, join them, also smoking cigarettes, and all chatter together loud-voiced, light-hearted, asking each other when they went last to so and so, "And isn't Tomkins good in--what do you call it?"

"Awfully!"

THE GAMBOLLING LAMB.

Presently, from a corner, where four or more boys' heads are close together, comes a burst of laughter.

"What's that? What is that? Tell it again," insists some one outside the charmed circle; and one of our own two particular boys recommences that anecdote about Tootsie.

But of a sudden some one says, "Chut! take care," squeezing the speaker's arm, and the group become conscious of the presence among them of another lamb—the Gambolling Lamb *par excellence*, "Jemmy," as they called him, the Hon. Tate Mutton.

All know him, and turn towards him. He is a study—a revelation—something only to be looked for in the last stages of advanced civilization, at a time when a change seems coming—what Emile Zola would describe as the "*dernière expression de l'épuisement d'une race*"—the last sample of the exhaustion of a species. As when you light upon a long silvery slimy line meandering across a garden wall, you know it to be the trail of a snail, so you might say of Tate Mutton. There have been men and women ahead of *this* long, long ago.

Small, mean-looking, with thin straw-coloured hair, no eyebrows, no eye-lashes, no hirsute symptom of any kind upon his face—he might be a girl dressed up. He looks eighteen, but he is twenty-two, bearing, by courtesy, the title Honourable. An Earl's son, the son of that same Countess I paid a visit to, you may remember, perhaps, down a Fulham lane—that wretched woman with the gin-bottle and sordid surroundings—the possessor of a princely fortune in his own right, the heir to a noble title, which he may live to enjoy.

The rosy boy ceases talking as he approaches, for the diamond rings Tootsie wears upon her chubby little hands the Hon. Tate has given to her.

"'Ow do?" he says. He never shakes hands. "'Ow do?" and he passes up the stairs.

At the top some one crosses his path. It is the lord who years ago had patted Tootsie Mite's mother's head paternally, the same lord whose gloved hands had flapped like bats' wings over the velvet cushion in front of the private box, at Tootsie herself. He nods to Tate and Tate nods to him.

"I didn't know you were in town," says the elder man, whose complexion, by the way, is a perfect study of white and pink artistically blended. "Been up long?"

"Only came up to-day. See you later on, perhaps, at the club?"

"I don't think so," says his lordship, dubiously. "Not quite in sorts. By-the-bye, you play heavily at the club, I hear."

"Not very—who said so?"

"I was told—well, *you* can afford to lose, that's one comfort. I couldn't. The curtain's going up—'Night to you."

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"Night!" responds Tate.

These two are father and son.

* * * * *

It is the first night of the burlesque, and though half the stalls were empty when, a while ago, I left them, they are quite full now. As I glance round, I recognize here and there a few faces of men I know—newspaper critics. More still are sprinkled about in the dress circle above. There are only two women in all the stalls. With the exception of the critics—numbering perhaps a score—the rest are our lambs, carrying quite a small forest of sticks, knob and crutch shape.

As I glance to my left I see Tate's sallow cheek ghoul-like amongst so much rosiness!

But the curtain has drawn up. Now for the piece. It is a classical burlesque. The floor of the stage is lumbered up with loveliness, more or less well shaped, sprawling in attitudes more or less graceful or ungainly. Here one woman, ridiculously fat, here another ridiculously thin. There a young girl, a *débutante*, pretty and *gauche*, evidently awfully uncomfortable in a dress some part of which pinches her. Here an old stager, whose eyes travel along the rows of the lamb-pen where I sit inquiringly. Then she looks vexed. Some one has not come.

There is an opening chorus, out of tune. Then a comic scene between so-called comic men, very bad. Then the stout lady and the thin one sing and dance. This is worse than the men's performance.

But here we have a favourite with an entrance to herself. She is loud-voiced and demonstrative. She too dances, and the stage trembles beneath the blows she deals it with her brass-tipped heels. In her wake comes Tootsie, calm and cool and childlike. She has a word or two to say, and does so inaudibly.

Presently I see she has recognized Tate with a scarcely perceptible smile, and is looking about the house for some other acquaintance.

All is, so far, desperately bad, vulgar, and stupid. When, glancing at the bill as the scene changes, I find we have got four more scenes to get through, I begin to despair.

But this sentiment does not appear to be shared by the lambs, who, as though it were a duty, are silently sitting out the dismal rubbish. They do not often laugh; they never applaud. Seemingly it is not their duty to do so. As they sit it out, I do also, but secretly I register a vow, "Never again! never again!"

The play is at an end; the critics pass each other with shrugs of the shoulders and significant raisings of the eyebrows. One says "Rubbish," and another uses a shorter word with the same meaning.

On my way out I pass the manager, with whom I am acquainted. I say, "All right, eh?" by way of cheering him.

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"Oh, yes! right enough," he answers, with a tinge of impatience in his tone, from which I gather he has already been the recipient of much uninvited criticism.

At this moment Lord Deddered passes, but stops to shake him by the hand. Behind his back the manager makes a face. Immediately afterwards Tate appears. The manager leaves me abruptly to take Tate's arm, and he whispers to him eagerly in a corner of the now almost deserted corridor.

I slowly descend the stairs to the street, and at the door pass by the last of the lambs, lingering behind to light their cigarettes. *From half a word I catch it is my impression one is telling the others "that" about Tootsie.*

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE WRONG SIDE OF A STAGE MOON.

THE Manager of the Frivolity was right and I was wrong. The new burlesque extravaganza is a "big go," and the knob-sticks every evening crowd the stalls.

But it is not the same lady playing Luna on the second night who played it on the first. The first Luna has been totally eclipsed.

I think there is a sad as well as a comic side to the story, but I must leave you to decide which is which.

The piece, a much-mangled seriously-Lord-Chamberlain version of a Folies-Bergère success, has two authors' names upon its programme, one that of a person of some experience in these matters, the other our erst funny gentleman, Griggs. It is Griggs who has first been let loose upon the original, and who has done deeds of daring in the shape of puns and comic couplets. Then the Lord Chamberlain takes the work in hand, and after it has travelled to and fro for some time between the office of the examiner of plays and the manager's room, the services of an author of some experience are called in, and he and Mr. Ratterplan Mouser, the manager, lay their heads together, and cut, slash, twist, and turn the poor work inside out and upside down.

"There, that'll do for them," says the author of some experience; "send it to them now."

Mouser sends it. "And now," says he, "let's see how it is to be cast. I'll give the parts out to-morrow, and have a call next day. We've wasted time enough."

The piece is therefore put into rehearsal without wasting more time waiting for the official consent. This, however, comes in due course, on the morning of the day of performance, couched in the usual terms:—

"It having been represented to Me by the Examiner of All Theatrical

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Entertainments that a manuscript entitled 'Luna Revolvered,' being an extravaganza, does not in its general tendency contain anything immoral or otherwise improper for the Stage, I, the Lord Chamberlain of HER MAJESTY'S Household, do, by virtue of my Office, and in pursuance of the Act of Parliament in that case provided, Allow the Performance of the said manuscript at your theatre, with the exception of all Words and Passages which are specified by the Examiner in the endorsement of the Licence, and without any further variations whatever."

(Signed by the Examiner and the Lord Chamberlain.)

The words quoted are "Damn it" and "God bless you." As to the variations made, pending the arrival of the licence, during rehearsal, perhaps I had better say nothing. Whatever the author of some experience contributes is contributed then, and is principally of a topical character, about politics, ritualism, the blunders of a criminal judge, the Royal Family, and the office of the Lord Chamberlain and Reader of Plays.

As to Griggs's share in the work, it is somewhat difficult to say where it has begun or ended. He receives no direct notification of the rehearsals, but gleaning particulars from half a sheet of foolscap, pasted up in the passage leading from the stage-door to the stage, he makes an attempt to pass by the janitor in charge.

This dignitary, however, is of opinion that Griggs's name should first be sent up to Mr. Mouser, or to Mr. Dando, the stage manager.

"My name is Griggs," says our funny man, proudly producing his card. "I'm the author of the piece in rehearsal."

"Ye-es, I daresay," replies the stage-doorkeeper. "If you'll wait here I'll send your card in by the first person that goes through."

I will not dwell upon the rage and fury of our Griggs chafing without the sacred portal, until at length some one takes the message, and in due course, the manager being found, the poor author gets the password, and stumbles down the steps, wiser, if humbled. Nor need I linger here to describe the gradually increasing sense of nothingness that overwhelms him as he is pushed to and fro, jostled from resting-place to resting-place, hanging on, desperately and despairingly, to the skirts of anything that will associate with him, even a super, unknown to all but the author of some experience, and Mr. Mouser, the manager, neither of whom has time to speak. All this concerns Griggs alone; not you or me, to whom it is of no consequence whatever. Let us get on to Luna.

"I say, Mouser," says the author of some experience, a loud-voiced man, very sure of himself, very full of himself, and occupying a good deal of the stage at one time, owing to a habit he has of standing with his legs astride, "where's this woman for Luna? We can't get on, you know, without we have this woman for Luna."

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"The fact is," says Mouser, "I can't get anything to suit. You want too much."

"Too much!" shouts the author of some experience; "there's thousands of them. A tall woman, with a figure that will bear showing up—there are thousands of them."

"It's only a small part," here Griggs ventures to break in.

"Small part!" repeats the A. of S. E. "It's no part at all. Any fool could do, if she looked it."

Griggs thinks of some exquisitely-laboured lines which in the far-off past he has put into Luna's mouth, but refrains from referring to them. "I know some one," he says. "Shall I bring her here?"

"Yes, let's have a look at her, if she's worth anything," says the A. of S. F. "Bring her to-morrow morning."

The young lady Griggs has in his mind's eye is "Miss Rosie June," at least she is so called on the playbill. It is an idea of Griggs's, and thought at the time to be a happy one. Her real name may or may not have been Wilkins. That is her mamma's name, at any rate, a grey-haired, soft-spoken old lady, who lives in a genteel terrace out of the Waterloo Road, in a genteel house, primly furnished with a parlour like a waiting-room at a railway station, and a New Testament that she has taken in shilling numbers of a pedlar, gorgeously bound in red and gold, displayed upon the centre table.

Miss Rosie, then, a tall, fine, fair girl, a trifle slim, is as good, I have no doubt, as she is pretty. Why, she lives at home with her widowed mother!

Mrs. Wilkins, the good little grey-haired lady, has many friends—"good, kind friends," she calls them—and Griggs is one of these. When (having unnecessarily taken a cab to save time, for there are hours to spare) he dashes up to the door of the house, and flies into the miniature railway waiting-room, the two ladies, on hearing the good news, take him to their heart of hearts, and pour tears and blessings upon his head. It has been Rosie's one great ambition to have a "speaking part," not hitherto having done more than "extra" in a Drury Lane pantomime.

When Griggs proudly ushers the way to the Frivolity stage next day (a two-shilling piece had brought about a better understanding between him and the doorkeeper), Mr. Mouser has forgotten all about the appointment, and says he has found some one else, and has as good as engaged her. The author of some experience, on the other hand, is for cutting out the moon scene altogether.

Griggs begins to feel abjectly small, and poor Rosie is ready to burst into tears, when the A. of S. E. says "Where is she? Let's have a look at her."

So they look at Rosie, standing there in such poor little clothes and things as she could afford to buy with the savings from her scanty earnings

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as an extra lady—the velvet mantle, tight-fitting and fur-tipped (it is chilly weather), the eight-buttoned glove, the thirty-one-and-sixpenny shoe, the bonnet, a cheap thing of a guinea or two from Madame Louise's—all very plain and neat and becoming. The A. of S. E. thinks the moon scene had better be left in, and Rosie is engaged.

There is only one drawback to the whole business (of course a large salary has not been expected)—Rosie must find her own costume.

"Dear me! dear me!" exclaims mamma, in soft-toned accents of distress; "it will cost fifteen pounds."

"Oh! not as much as that, mamma!" cries Rosie; "not more than fourteen, I should think. If I only knew some one who would advance the stupid, dreadful money, I could repay it out of my salary."

Good girl! She was to have fifteen shillings a week.

"I'll manage the dress somehow," says Griggs as he leaves. It is about half-past five; he has seen mother and child home, and stayed for five-o'clock tea.

Possibly you have no notion of the trouble it is to get a thing done to time by a theatrical tradesman. The costumier is bad enough, but no language can describe the bootmaker. Everything, however, is put in hand, and except that he pledges himself as security for payment, and goes with Rosie about half a dozen times to each shop to see what progress is being made, Griggs does not trouble himself much about this part of the business.

Vexatious things are going on at the theatre. There has been such ruthless slashing at the poor piece, he hardly recognizes any of his own work. Fearful passages, too, have been introduced—primæval puns, allusions to topics of the day in the very worst taste, which, knowing he is responsible as author, make him shudder.

As a rising young literary gent of cultured taste and elegant style he has been hitherto known. He has also some local official appointment. He may even be reported to the Board.

He has made his mind up not to go to the first performance, but he goes; and he is sneaking about round the stage-door just five minutes before the curtain should rise, when Rosie, violently agitated, catches him by the arm.

"The dress," she gasps. "The man won't leave it without the money! How could you? *Where ever have you been hiding?*"

This is cruel, but in crises like these one cannot pick one's words. "I've only a cheque," he says. "Where's this fellow?"

The fellow is within hearing and objects to cheques. Mouser, then, must be found. Mouser is in front, but is not sure he can do it. Retiring and consulting awhile, however, and after many minute inquiries as to the means of the man who has drawn the cheque (the head of one of the chief firms in Paternoster Row), the money is forthcoming, and only twenty minutes' or

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so wasted. Rosie, on taking the parcel from the hands of the doubting tradesman, hurries away to put the clothes on, and Griggs, going round again in front, creeps into a dark corner and swears deeply at the imbecility of the exhibition he has had a hand in.

"Of all the trash!" says some one in front.

"Ugh!" said some one else; "what could you expect from an unmitigated fool like Griggs?"

When he sees a chance, he escapes, making his way shamefacedly past some late-arriving friends. "I'll go and see how Rosie's getting on," he thinks.

He finds anarchy prevailing in Rosie's dressing-room. She has on the dress, but she says it fits her nowhere, and the man has never sent the boots. "My turn will come in five minutes. What am I to do? Can you take a cab and go for them?"

He does so, and finds when he gets to the shop that the boots are on their way to the theatre. As the man kneels down to put them on, Rosie is called. The boots are a mile too big, and yet they will not button. Are they on the right feet?

Again she is called at the door of the room. Dando, the stage manager, foaming at the mouth, yells at her to come on.

The stage is kept waiting. Some one gags idiotically. The orchestra plays the same bars of music three times over. A man in the pit begins to hiss. But at length she makes her appearance, staggering as she does so, her helmet all on one side.

"She's tight," says a knob-stick in the stalls, quite loud.

It is not true; but she is terribly frightened. The lime-light gives the *coup de grâce*. Suddenly poured into her face, half blinding her, it drives all the words out of her head. She sings her two lines out of tune and babbles. The exhibition is supremely ridiculous and painful. As she leaves the stage there is a roar of laughter and gibing words.

* * * * *

"What made you make me make such a fool of myself?" she cries, with a burst of passionate tears. "It's all your doing—all—all!"

Griggs dries up and droops in the background.

"Don't you set your foot in my theatre again, Miss What's-your-name," cries Mouser, brutally.

And the following night Tootsie Mite takes the part.

Poor Rosie! She meant so well!

CHAPTER XXXIII.

MR. TOOTSIE—A MAN.

OF course Tootsie is not his surname. He has a real surname, I suppose; indeed, I think I have heard it mentioned somewhere—at a bar, and I have heard Miss call him Johnny or Freddy, or something of the kind; but as a rule he is spoken of only as Mr. Tootsie, Tootsie Mite's lawful wedded husband. What little individuality the creature ~~may~~ have had some long time past I know not, but he is known now only in the outer world as one of the belongings of Miss Tootsie.

How did I first become acquainted with him? Why, when I come to think of it, that is a good story, but requires a certain number of sentences to tell properly. If I were simply to state that the first time I ever met Mr. Tootsie he kicked me, I should perhaps be giving you a wrong impression.

Heavens! think of the degradation of being kicked by a Mr. Tootsie. But kicked I was, and by him. He apologized, it is true—nay, he apologized abjectly, and we shook hands afterwards.

* * * * *

Perhaps I had better explain.

I was standing at the back of the dress circle at a theatre upon the Surrey side, resting my elbows on the wooden partition which separates the dress circle seats from the circular passage behind, and was looking at the pantomime, when a burlesque prince, no other, indeed, than Miss herself, came upon the stage, and instantly a little man, standing next to me, began in a frenzied way to beat the palms of his hands together, to cry bravo, and to lunge out his little legs, dealing the inoffensive wooden partition before him vicious digs with his toes, and one dig going wrong grazed my ankle.

Upon which, full of wrath, I cried, "Confound you!"—though, by the way, I don't think it was "confound"—"Keep your feet to yourself. Don't kick me."

"I really beg a thousand pardons, sir," said Mr. Tootsie; "I am very sorry, indeed. I trust I have not hurt you, sir. It was quite accidental."

And whilst I was glowering, dark as thunder, at the stage in front of me, the little man slipped from his place at my side, and I gradually recovered my equanimity.

Meanwhile, Miss Tootsie's scene progressed, and presently reached its climax, with a duet and dance. At the conclusion, conspicuous by the silence elsewhere, a frantic burst of applause, accompanied by the clatter of hoofs, attracted my attention to the opposite side of the house. There, again, was the little man, hard at it hand and foot, and—yes, by Jove! he had kicked some one else, and now, covered with blushes, was once more apologizing profusely.



MR. TOOTSIE.

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MR. TOOTSIE—A MAN.

I was acquainted with Victim No. 2, and sought him out, and asked him whether he was much hurt, and requested further information respecting Miss Tootsie's *Claque*. Whilst we were talking together, the *Claque* itself came smiling up to us, and said to my friend, "Mr. Smith, you must introduce me to Mr. Jones"—meaning me.

"Mr. Jones," said my friend. "Mr.—Mr.—in fact, the husband of Miss Tootsie."

In fact, if you must know, and as Mr. Smith subsequently explained, he had forgotten Mr. Tootsie's real name, if, indeed, which he said he doubted, he had ever heard it.

But Mr. Tootsie took the thing in good part, and smiled more than ever. "I have so often heard of you, Mr. Jones," said he. "And, indeed, who does not know Mr. Jones by reputation? But somehow, I have not yet had the pleasure of meeting you. Miss Tootsie always takes in your paper. She is a great admirer of it."

To turn the conversation, which was becoming almost too personal for my entire enjoyment, I said, "Miss Tootsie seems to have a capital part."

The little man made a face. "So-so," he said. "All there is in it she has put in herself." Then, with a glance round to see that the author was not about, "There's nothing in the words, absolutely nothing. Robinson can't write. Too heavy, much too heavy; Miss Tootsie had to cut a lot out."

"I liked the duet," I said.

"Ah, she's not in voice to-night. She has a dreadful cold. This morning I really did not think it possible she could come down here at all. You noticed it, of course. Ah! that's her scene. You're not going yet, I hope. Her best bit is further on. Good bye for the present. See you again."

I did not leave till after the best bit, which I need not say was substantially applauded by at least one member of the audience. As I was going away, the little man clung to my arm, and forced a folded playbill on me, on which, when I came to examine it, I found that Miss Tootsie's name and the "bits" in the synopsis where she appeared to advantage were carefully underlined. "A wretched house," he said, in a confidential undertone—"wretched. So cold! But you will see in a night or two there'll only be one in it."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"In the piece, you know; Miss Tootsie will do what she likes with them. They won't have a leg to stand on. Did you see Topsy Sykes? Well, what a manager can want to thrust a woman like that down the public's throat for—it's monstrous! You won't forget the name—Miss Tootsie! Good night. So pleased to have met you."

All this happened in those now far-off days before Miss Tootsie had made the reputation she has since made upon the stage, or created the scandal off it that has helped as much as anything else to place her at the head of her profession. For a long while Mr. Tootsie regularly sent me cuttings from

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newspapers and bills and pictures. Then for some reason or other these attentions ceased. He was too busy in some other quarter. When next I meet him is some years later, behind the scenes at the Brobdignagian.

The Brobdignagian stage, owing to the nature of the performances there given, in which ballet forms the principal attraction, wears at all seasons the somewhat exceptional aspect of Drury Lane or Covent Garden during pantomime-time. It is like a beehive peopled with ballet-girl bees. The wings are choked up with them. A stream of them crowds one staircase coming down, against which another struggling stream mounting upwards fights its way with bursts of shrill laughter and a Babel of tongues.

A sea of bare shoulders tosses tumultuously around, and gauzy billows buffet you as petticoats whisk to and fro in what seems like a meaningless scramble. When presently you come to look at your coat-sleeve, there is a patch of bismuth on it six inches long.

Here, as one of the principals, Miss Tootsie has a short engagement, and a cupboard of her own to dress in.

Just before, a certain manager and I have been watching her from the front. There has been a gorgeous procession, in which a crowd of fantastically-attired Egyptian nymphs have led the way to an entrance of Amazons, glittering with gold, and then Satyrs and Bacchantes, she leading, scantily draped, standing in the centre of a well-arranged group, with a languid gesture of her naked arm giving the signal for the approach of captives whose death-tortures she is to decide upon.

The cupboard her majesty makes her toilet in is about ten feet square, with a low ceiling a moderately tall man could easily touch. There is a small window blocked up by a shutter. The ceiling is black and the wall-paper ragged. The dressing-table is of deal, over which is spread a dirty towel. A cheap glass stands upon it, and round about are brushes and a comb, a rouge-pot, a powder-box, and "noir" thrown confusedly together. The walls are very thin, and during the intervals of our conversation we hear some ballet girls in another cupboard somewhere close at hand talking of Shakespeare, the musical glasses, and other kindred topics.

My friend the manager, knowing Miss Tootsie's engagement is approaching a close, has come to offer her terms. She wants time to reflect. He wants an immediate answer, and produces a paper already filled up. I may mention that he is a Jewish gentleman, rather good at bargains.

At this moment there is a discreet tap at the door.

"Who's that?" asks Miss Tootsie.

"Only me," says a mild voice. "Are you engaged?"

"No; come in, I want you," says Miss Tootsie; and Mr. Tootsie enters.

"Ah! to be sure," says the manager, in a tone which shows he had very nearly made an error of some kind, and is glad he has got out of it. "I shall want this gentleman's signature too. To be sure." (A.D. 1882.)

MR. TOOTSIE—A MAN.

It is Mr. Tootsie ; and now I come to remember, of course I ought to know his real name, because he subsequently sues my friend the manager, *in his real name*, for arrears of salary owing to Miss Tootsie.

* * * * *

When next I see Mr. Tootsie is during Miss Tootsie's engagement at the Frivolity, in the place of Miss Rosie June, with the particulars of whose dismal downfall you are already acquainted.

It is behind the scenes here that I meet him.

"What a time it is since I saw you last !" he says. "How well you are looking ! not a day older."

"Nor you either," I say ; and in truth Mr. Tootsie retains his juvenility and his roses very wonderfully. There are only quite a few telltale crows' feet round his eyes.

"Have you been in front ?" he continues. "What a reception, eh ? I never heard anything like it. You know Miss Tootsie, of course. She'll be so glad to see you. Come to her dressing-room."

We are close by it at the moment. Mr. Tootsie taps, smiling blandly.

"Who's that ?" asks Miss Tootsie's voice.

"Only me," replies Mr. Tootsie. "Are you engaged ? may I come in ?"

"Come back presently, I'm busy," says the voice, at which a momentous blankness spreads itself over Mr. Tootsie's face, for there are the sounds of several voices within, accompanied by the jingling of glasses and some suppressed mirth.

Mr. Tootsie looks at me, and I look at Mr. Tootsie. I feel curious to know what is going to happen next.

I am pretty certain that were I not there, Mr. Tootsie would do as he is bidden, and return anon ; but the situation, as things stand, is awkward.

Mr. Tootsie gently tries the door. It is fastened within, and he taps again.

"My dear, I must speak to you ; here's Mr. Jones."

"What do you say ?" asks Miss Tootsie ; "what a bother you are !"

The name is repeated, and the door opened.

"I am afraid I am disturbing you, Miss Tootsie," I say, advancing ; and through a blue cloud of cigarette-smoke I see Tate Mutton and three or four young gentlemen seated on red velvet-covered easy chairs, nursing their knob-sticks and opera-hats, with champagne-glasses by their sides. I look round for Mr. Tootsie : he has gone again, closing the door gently behind him.

After the performance is over, I have occasion to remain behind in the theatre for half an hour or so, and eventually leave by the stage-door. Just in front of me, a pale and attenuated little spectre—Tate Mutton, in fact, the Gambolling Lamb—is assisting two ladies, one of them Miss Tootsie, into a well-appointed brougham, in which he subsequently takes his seat, giving the name of a restaurant Regent Street way to the coachman.

BEHIND A BRASS KNOCKER.

Before they drive off, however, Tate speaks to somebody standing near the carriage door.

"Ta-ta, old man," he says; "take care of yourself:- Have a weed?"

"Thanks, old boy; yes—very kind of you."

And thus he leaves Mr. Tootsie, with a shilling cigar in his hand.

"You are not of the party, then?" I ask, innocently.

"Lord bless me, no!" says Mr. Tootsie. "I can't stand their late hours; but young people will be young people. Well, it went splendidly to-night, didn't it? You'll give Miss Tootsie a line, won't you?"

At this moment a haggard, hangdog-faced wretch, ragged, sodden, purple-nosed and sallow-cheeked, plucks at Mr. Tootsie's arm, and swaying to and fro, gradually steadies himself, like unto the pendulum of a clock run down.

"See here, ole f'la; half momen'."

Mr. Tootsie is for one half-moment overwhelmed with confusion, but recovers dexterously, and apologizing to me, leads this apparition aside, and I see him pass money to it and slap it on the shoulder. They are the best of friends; and as it lights the shilling cigar—at the wrong end—*I recognize, by the flare of the vesuvian, Miss Tootsie's papa, Mr. Mite.*

* * * * *

Again 't is spring-time, and Mother Nature wears a frock of freshest green tint. Strolling through Ghoul Square, I find the house has been let, and is being put into thorough repair. Upon inquiry I learn that it has been taken by the Salvation Army.

How men and things change! Our good Lord Deddered is numbered no longer among the unrighteous, and no longer wears a wig. Silver-haired is he, and sanctified. The Army have bought his town house also, and he, too, is a convert. Most of the ballet from the Brobdignagian and the Frivolity have been to hear him preach.

THE END.

In the Press, uniform with this work:

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BY FREDERICK BARNARD AND C. H. ROSS,

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